Aurora Levins Morales

MEDICINE STORIES

ESSAYS FOR RADICALS

Revised & Expanded Edition

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essays for radicals

Aurora Levins Morales

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LIBATION

To write the full story of where my thinking comes from would require another entire book, the autobiography of my sensipensante heart-mind-body. There are certainly other writers, artists, and intellectuals whose work has fed my own, and first among them are my parents, Rosario Morales and Richard Levins, who raised my brothers and me to think critically and creatively about the world, and who remained my close friends, comrades, and colleagues until their deaths—and beyond—since I still listen for their voices. Next is my brother Ricardo, co-conspirator and comrade from childhood, weaver of images and words right beside my weaving of words and images, co-theorist of the arts of social justice, first phone call, now that my mother is gone, to read my rough drafts to.

But the roots of my thinking lie in a web of friendships, liberation movements, and my own social conditions as a light-skinned Puerto Rican Ashkenazi Jewish, disabled, chronically ill, migrant, mixed-class, single mother, Woman of Color artist and intellectual. I'm a product of time, place, condition, and the people I've loved.

I can't possibly name all of the streams that have fed into the flow of my thinking over the course of my lifetime, so today, sitting at a beachfront table in Puerto Morelos, on the Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo, Mexico, I will say that I sprang in equal measure from the humanist Marxism of my parents and the ecological awareness I learned from them and from the

rain-drenched mountains of western Puerto Rico; the forests and birds; from my mother's passionate and clear-eyed feminism and my father's love of complexity in nature and human societies; from being a teenager in the women's liberation and antiwar movements; from early and repeated visits to revolutionary Cuba; and the many radical Jews I've loved and worked with; from being part of the 1980s upsurge of writing by Women of Color; and my thirty-four-plus years in Reevaluation Counseling; and from taking part in solidarity movements with Chile, the Black Panthers, South Africa, Palestine, Cuba, and many other global sites of struggle.

I was shaped by La Peña Cultural Center's Cultural Productions Group, an intensely creative collaboration that was also rife with sexism and produced groundbreaking multimedia performances about Latin America. I was shaped by *This Bridge Called My Back*, which credentialed me to speak at colleges and universities for pay, and by a forty-year literary collaboration with my mother, by the Third World News Bureau of KPFA, and the flowering of radical arts in every genre by people from hundreds of cultures that is San Francisco's left arts scene. I was shaped by every conversation, every collaboration, every collective brainstorm, and there have been many. Special among them are the Latina Feminist Group, co-creators of *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, and JOCSM: Jews of Color, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jews in Solidarity with Palestine, two collectivities full of brilliant, creative, funny people who understand the importance of belly laughs and good food to cutting-edge political work.

In the writing of this second edition of *Medicine Stories* a few people played significant roles, reading and commenting on my writing, listening to me think my way through knots, and encouraging me to abandon perfectionism and keep it as simple as I can. Gratitude to Alicia Raquel, April Rosenblum, Chela Blitt, Gwyn Kirk, Monica Gomery, Ricardo Levins Morales, Ruth Mahaney, and Susan Raffo.

Thanks to my co-counselors: Catalina Vallejos Bartlett, Claudia Martinez, Ilana Streit, Jennileen Joseph and the Dream Team she leads, Julie Saxe-Taller, Michael Saxe-Taller, Randi Freundlich, Rebecca Mautner, and the crew at RCCR.

I am, as always, grateful to my ancestors, without whom I would not be here, carrying their gifts and sorrows, and to the generous, beautiful, wounded earth, always trying to teach us how to live. I pray this book may offer nourishment, medicine, navigation, and tools to my people, the radicals.

A NOTE ON REPETITION

In the work I do, repetition is a method, a rhythm of meaning that must be maintained, a beat to my message. Many of us radical writers and artists and public speakers know that we are spending our lives saying one or two things over and over again, sometimes in a rainbow of different ways, sometimes using the same phrases over and over, refrains between the many verses of shifting examples and illustrations. Throughout this book there will be words, phrases, sentences that circle around and are said again. This isn't a mistake. It isn't a failure of editing. This is a tool, a genre, a Caribbean Jewish chant. This is my revolutionary oy le lo ay le lo lai.

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ECOLOGY IS EVERYTHING

We live on a planet that has been changed by the actions of human beings to the point that it may not continue to support our existence. This planet we talk about so much isn't just a location. It's a biosphere, a living organism of which we are part, and on which we depend. I don't refer to our ecosystem as "the environment" because that term implies that the biosphere is really a kind of stage for human activity, a backdrop, existing to support us. It also tends to segregate what we consider natural and not, to place the habitats we have engineered, and we ourselves, outside "nature."

The ecological crisis we find ourselves in is in fact a crisis of human relations, with each other and with the entire planet. It is a crisis created by a set of false assumptions about reality, the same assumptions that drive all systems of oppression. That greed and domination are the inherent driving forces of human existence and, therefore, that warfare, conquest, enslavement, exploitation, the looting of other people and of the entire ecosystem are natural and inevitable, and therefore must be okay.

The intransigence of climate change deniers, their refusal to accept the scientific consensus, based on extensive and compelling evidence, that human activity is dramatically changing our ecosystem, their willingness to spend fortunes promoting conspiracy theories to account for and invalidate that consensus, is really a defense of the goodness of greed.

In order to continue their plundering, they refuse to accept that there are limits to what can be extracted, from the physical planet or from other people. If we accept that the earth is becoming catastrophically less habitable for humans because of reckless extraction driven by avarice, then the founding myth of capitalism, that greed is a benign, creative force with tolerable costs, collapses.

It's heartbreaking that there are so many human beings who cling to the sinking ship of infinite piracy, unable to imagine a society of reciprocity, respect, and mutual care that would meet the needs of all, including them. They would rather accelerate their looting, hoping to amass as much wealth as possible before the ship founders, even though that ship is our entire world and no amount of ownership will keep them from drowning.

But for those of us who are able to envision that society, it's essential that we understand this: every struggle is an ecological struggle.

The problems in our relationships with each other and with the so-called natural world are the same. If we understand ourselves as part of a living ecosystem continually being shaped by and shaping us, then everything we do has ecological implications, and every attempt to mend or protect our ecosystem is inevitably rooted in questions of social justice. For human society to be sustainable on earth, it must become inclusive, must take into account the well-being of each one of us.

Much of the oxygen we breathe is made by plankton in our oceans, and the oceans are in grave danger. The only way we can stop, and reverse as much as we can, the extensive damage to our oceans—dangerous levels of acidification, oxygen-starved dead zones without any life at all, coral die-off, massive islands of garbage, and other threats to marine life, including major sources of human food—is to have societies of people who think differently, who understand and practice interdependence, who are not pressed by poverty into overfishing, who understand the connection between burning coal and poisoning the sea and are able to do something about it. Only an interdependent humanity with the resources and power to make good ecological choices can act effectively on behalf of the seas or any other part of the world ecosystem essential for our lives.

Therefore anything that threatens human interdependence is an ecological threat. First among these is the existence of economic classes, the massive, worldwide exploitation of most people's work to pay for luxuri-

ous lives for a small minority, and the recruitment of a larger minority to participate in this system for more modest portions of the loot.

Every other system of oppression is at the service of this goal, the concentration of wealth. Every other systemic oppression exists to create and uphold that project: the attempts to exterminate indigenous peoples in order to occupy and extract wealth from the land and water they live with; the enslavement of millions of African people whose forced, unpaid labor made it possible for European Americans to quickly amass fortunes, build roads and cities, dominate world markets for their crops, and the ongoing exploitation of their descendants; the immense and deeply rooted structures that violently control the reproductive abilities of female-bodied people, and the physical and emotional labor of all women; the commodifying of sex into an international commerce in rape, destroying lives, bodies, psyches, cultures in its wake; the discarding and often killing of people whose bodies and minds can't comply with the demands of profit-making work—people referred to as disabled; the violent enforcement of rigid categories of sexuality and gender, the better to control us; the placement of artificial borders dividing up looting rights between different groups of owners and the enormous waste of lives and other resources spent in wars to guard or expand those looting rights.

We think about making cities more "livable" in terms of urban farms, restored streams, pedestrian zones, and cleaner and more efficient public transportation, but more than half of humanity lives in cities, often as the result of collapsing rural economies and wars. If human interdependence is essential for better ecological choices to be implemented, then every aspect of urban life is ecological: poverty, segregation, racist and sexist divisions of resources, the existence of food wastelands, inequitable and impoverished health services, the endless violence of the police toward Black people and other People of Color, including Black and brown immigrants, the mismanagement of essential life supports such as clean water and air, the lack of basic safety, and all the ways we structure work, housing, transportation, neighborhoods, schools: these are all aspects of urban ecosystems. If we don't solve cities, we won't solve anything, and the only way to solve cities is to liberate the people in them.

When the basics of life are threatened by ecological harm, the consequences fall the hardest on people already systematically deprived of resources and self-determination. From the aftermaths of hurricanes to

the deforestation of the tropics, from the depletion of fish to changes in temperature and rainfall that herald the collapse of coffee production, ecological disasters are inevitably disasters of social injustice that flow along the existing cracks in our world.

Eco-activism with a narrow focus on wildlife and wilderness that does not take into account the unequal impacts of ecological destruction on different groups of people, or the different relationships they may have to land, water, trees, and other species, ends up perpetuating the injustices that are blocking our way toward lasting solutions. Wildlife advocacy groups attempting to protect tigers in India have unleashed state violence against indigenous people for whom tiger hunting is culturally important and could be sustainably managed. Middle-class urban activists trying to revive sustainable agriculture in Puerto Rico are becoming rural organic farmers, but sometimes treat local growers of coffee and bananas, with a long and intimate knowledge of soil, rainfall, and pests, as ignorant or irresponsible for growing cash crops with pesticides, failing to understand how poverty drives their decisions.

My father used to pose this question to his students: What is the relationship between women's ownership of land and the nitrogen-fixing qualities of legumes? Because women have less access to capital, we tend to own smaller farms. We also tend to plant more diverse crops, because a manageable scale and a variety of crops whose most intensive labor is spread out over the year are most compatible with child rearing and other domestic work, which is still overwhelmingly the responsibility of women. A small and diverse farm both allows and requires a more intimate knowledge of how plants, soil, insects, birds, and animals interact. It allows for and requires better management of the soil than plantation farming does, and close observation teaches us the importance of rotating crops and planting legumes and other nitrogen fixers to maintain fertility where nitrogen-hungry crops grew the season before. Feminist land reform, increasing women's decision-making power about how land is farmed, is an essential component of protecting the soil that vast monocultures deplete.

At this point in our history, many of the most powerful fights against extractive economics are being led by indigenous people whose deep cultural ties to specific ecosystems give them an understanding of our interdependence with earth, water, and other species and a clear picture of the

disastrous costs of extraction. In every case of indigenous environmentalism, the defense of specific waters and lands is also a fight for indigenous sovereignty and resistance to multiple forms of genocide.

The peaceful, culturally rooted resistance of the Standing Rock Lakota water protectors and their indigenous and nonindigenous allies to the pipeline transport of some of the dirtiest petroleum in the world through their ancestral lands and rivers has grabbed the imaginations of people all over the world. Nonindigenous people often frame it as a climate change fight and a fight for clean water, without understanding that it is, at its core, a battle for indigenous survival, for the most basic of human rights: the right to exist.

"Water is life" doesn't just mean that we have to drink it to stay alive. It means water is alive, earth is alive, that these presences in our world are not inert "resources" to be claimed, packaged, and sold. They are bound by a billion strands into the fabric of the living world, and tearing them apart for profit cuts deep gashes into the biosphere, with consequences that spread far and wide. The failure to recognize this could destroy us all, beginning with the indigenous peoples whose commitments to these truths stand in the way of the final extractions: the last oil, the last clean water, the last forests, the last uncontaminated stretches of ocean, the last great dammable rivers.

Liberal environmentalism talks about cultivating corporate responsibility, about "greening" the pursuit of profit without changing the fundamental social relations that profit-driven economies require. The pursuit of wealth for its own sake, and not for the common good, not to enhance the quality of life on earth for all its living beings, inevitably leads those who pursue it to make decisions skewed by that goal, even if they practice some form of harm reduction. The underlying purposes of profit remain the same. Profit is built on inequality, which is incompatible with sustainability.

When power is in the hands of people whose driving desire is to accumulate as much wealth as they can, as quickly as possible, they will always choose short-term profit, no matter how destructive, over accountability to the rest of us. Underlying this drive, I believe, is a profound fear that those who don't dominate are doomed to be dominated, that the choice is between stealing what you can or starving. Part of our work, then, is to enrich the impoverished soil of the possible, to cultivate through both

our grand visions and our daily practices the belief that we can create societies in which it makes sense to place our lives in each other's hands, neither exploiters nor exploited, but simply kin.

We have the creativity and intelligence to solve the problems we face, but a great portion of human ingenuity is tied up with managing the challenges of just surviving oppression.

Nearly half the world's population, including 1 billion children, lives in poverty, and more than 1.3 billion in extreme poverty, defined as less than $1.25 a day. Over 750 million people don't have access to clean drinking water, which causes 2,300 deaths a day. One in nine people on Earth are chronically undernourished. In 2011, 45 percent of all child deaths, nearly 1.4 million, were caused by lack of food. One in nine children is growing up in a war zone, and children make up half of all refugees. This is the context within which we must work our transformation.

Years ago my colleague Victor Lewis said that the greatest untapped natural resource on Earth is the human imagination, but that if the cure for cancer lay in the mind of a starving child in a Brazilian favela, we were out of luck.

One of the things I love most about revolutionary Cubans is their perspective that each human's gifts are unique and irreplaceable, and that all of those gifts are essential. Many of their social policies express the idea that the purpose of revolution is to nourish and free those gifts to fully function in the world. In order to tap the great hidden aquifers of human ingenuity and let them well up to meet our thirst, we must remove every obstacle to the flowing of human potential.

That flow is blocked by poverty, inequality, violence, the lack of sovereignty and self-determination, basic security and health, and the psychological rubble of massive collective traumas, reinforced by endless false narratives fed to us day and night to explain why our suffering is our own fault.

In order to create ecologically viable societies and avoid our own extinction, we will have to build social movements that include all humans in our vision of environmentalism and our entire ecosystem in our vision of social justice.

Because every struggle is an ecological struggle, and the only path forward is to create fully inclusive and interdependent societies, it follows

that every ecological struggle must also be embedded in the call for universal social justice.

If we fall short, if we continue to build limited movements that treat the multitude of battles we face as separate and the work of full inclusion as a luxury, we will not be able to mobilize the power, resilience, clarity, and unity we need in order to win. I believe that we have it in us to rise to this moment, to end the failed experiment of greed, restore the streams of our creative power, and establish a global culture of reciprocity and generosity as the beating heart of human life on earth.

BIGGER *IS* BETTER

NAVIGATION

There is a widespread belief, that passes for common sense, that fighting for small goals is more practical than fighting for big ones, and it's totally and completely wrong. Counterintuitive as it may seem to people facing decades of losses and compromises, it remains harder to organize for small gains than for big ones, and trying to solve one problem at a time almost always leads to betrayals and mistakes.

Take the compact fluorescent bulb—please. The supposedly green choice for illumination uses less electricity to light up your days and nights than incandescent bulbs. That's the only problem it was designed to address, and we're encouraged to think that by buying them, we contribute to a greener, more sustainable world. But compact fluorescent bulbs are packed with toxic mercury that affects both producers and consumers. The work of making them is outsourced to nonunion, coal-fired Chinese factories, putting US workers out of work and Chinese workers into danger. And once made, the bulbs must be shipped from China to the United States on freighters fueled by oil. The problem is that lowering our electrical consumption is too small a goal.

What we really need is a way to produce energy that is ecologically and socially clean—no coal, no oil, no union busting, no black lung and mercury poisoning, no devastated communities and poisoned landscapes.

In order to achieve that, in spite of the immense resources of greedy oil companies with their power to overthrow governments and repress labor movements, we need many more people passionately committed to the task.

But once we let go of the illusion that we can save the planet by making small consumer choices and leaving the greater structures intact, once we reach for the stars, we have way more power to inspire each other. Once we think big, the indigenous people of Amazonian Ecuador and the residents of Richmond, California, can join forces with the heirs to murdered Nigerian environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Gulf Coast fishing communities devastated by the massive BP oil spill to fight the rule of oil corporations together.

Once we think big, innovators in technology and participatory democracy can collaborate. When we think big, hope is no longer deferred. Our small steps add up to a journey. We stop thinking that limiting our scope increases our chances. We don't throw anyone overboard for the sake of a little gain. When we think big, we fight for everyone.

In fact, anytime what we're fighting for brings us into conflict with the legitimate needs of another group of people, it's a sure sign that the picture is too small. There is no inherent conflict between the preservation of forests and the employment of loggers. We just need to devise a sustainable form of forestry and an economy that is built to support people and trees with equal care. True, it's a much bigger job, but it's a lot more interesting and has a much better chance of working than letting us be pitted against each other.

Big goals have another advantage. When you aspire to something that takes time to achieve, something historic and magnificent, it rises above the landscape of everyday tasks and give us a point of reference beyond our tumultuous weather. A big goal is like a star map, unchanged by wind and rain. Each time the clouds clear, we can check our positions against that reliable point of light and correct course as needed.

LA COYUNTURA

There's a term in Spanish that was part of all the leftist speeches of my youth: la coyuntura. It means "the situation," "the circumstances," "the current historical moment." If the big picture is a constellation of stars by

which we plot our course, the coyuntura is the muddy ground we stand on while we stargaze. The bloody, difficult present. In the coyuntura, we have not yet won. Each act carries risks we must weigh. Not all our alliances will hold. Repression can escalate alongside bribery. Some of what we want to build can't yet be built. We point ourselves toward those dreams, but the conditions don't yet exist to make them happen. Standing there in the mud, our job is to keep talking about stars while we shovel slush, add gravel, pass around hot Thermoses. Sometimes that means supporting solutions that are painfully inadequate, that cost us, but that still move us toward the universally humane future we long for.

Since my teens I have fought for women's right to abortion. I do believe that life begins at conception. I do believe that aborted fetuses die real and significant deaths. But here in the coyuntura, I believe the reproductive sovereignty of women is an essential foundation of the world I'm building. All of us, those who support abortion and those who oppose it, should be demanding the development of safe, free, 100 percent effective birth control. Parenting should be well-paid, well-supported work, so that no woman aborts because motherhood will bankrupt her and smother every other dream. And until we achieve those goals, I choose the sovereignty and safety of women who are pregnant against their wishes or best interests over the brief, precious lives of those barely formed seedlings. When Rafael Correa, former president of Ecuador, said he would resign sooner than legalize abortion, he was refusing to recognize that when we can't yet have it all, we must choose the path that most expands our capacity to get it all in the future.

Supporting Ecuadorian women's right to abortion is actually the least damaging path toward protecting Ecuadorian children. Empowered, sovereign, with control over their reproductive lives, Ecuadorian women can fight for effective birth control, social support for the work of child rearing, and the rights of mothers, and make abortion unnecessary.

In each situation we face, we need to ask ourselves if the fights we take on, the models we create, are steps on the path toward our biggest dreams or Band-Aids meant to make oppression more tolerable. For this reason, I don't have a fixed position on how or if I vote in elections. My goal is not to have a slightly less oppressive president or a single politician not wholly at the service of corporate donors. I want to end all oppression

and free this country and all others from cruel social policies driven by a hunger for profit, so I think carefully about how my actions challenge or support the illusions of democracy that keep people passive.

Some campaigns put candidates with radical visions where they can raise their voices often and speak for us. Some allow us to focus in on specific liberation issues in a big way. Others bolster illusions of choice where none exist. Sometimes I vote for someone because in the coyuntura, their opponent will cause more acute suffering and lives will be lost. In those cases, I am voting to protect people and resources for the real work. At other times, I vote for the radicals who have no chance of winning, because our presence needs to be declared and because they openly challenge lies about reality and ignite necessary conversations.

The combination of celestial navigation and a good working knowledge of mud gives us the flexibility we need to respond in powerful and creative ways to even the most harrowing of circumstances.

TRAVELING SHOES

Big pictures and strategic grappling with the coyuntura, essential as they are, aren't enough. In spite of the revolutionary bravado I inherited alongside my lessons in strategy, injustice is traumatic. It does real damage to our bodies, our relationships, our emotions and intellects. We're all trying our best, hampered by millennia of PTSD.

In order to stay true to our biggest visions and stay accurate in our day-to-day assessments of our next steps, we need to heal, actively, consciously, continuously. Internalized oppression, or historical trauma, is a big backpack full of rocks we haul around on our backs. It slows us down, tires us out, and skews our aim. There's a left tradition of seeing attention to our psyches as "navel gazing," a self-indulgent preoccupation with personal affairs, a kind of fiddling while the world burns. But that comes from old, male-dominated, overly narrow understandings of how people and societies change. If the personal is political, so is the political personal. If it is true, as Che Guevara so eloquently said, that a revolutionary commitment to human liberation is fueled by love, then how can we not be heartbroken by oppression? When Emma Goldman declared, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution," she was

talking about the necessity of joy. Joy, hope, love, healing, are powerful forces. Just because at times these ideas have been manipulated to reinforce individualism doesn't make them sentimental distractions.

Travelers setting out on long journeys have to pack responsibly. We need food and water, first-aid kits and flashlights, journals and harmonicas, sun hats and thermal underwear, and really good shoes. As radicals with long-term plans, we need to prepare for whole lifetimes of challenging work. We need to keep inventing and honing practices that keep us fit. This means consciously building our tool kits and medicine bags, facing and recovering from the traumas of ongoing, violent oppression in the middle of trying to dismantle it, channeling grief and outrage into more finely honed visions, more powerful and effective strategies, stronger and more open love for our people, instead of letting them drag us into urgency, impatience, in-fighting, burnout, or giving up.

WHAT'S IN YOUR BAG?

My personal medicine bag and tool kit have been gathered over a lifetime of activism. Here are the main ingredients.

Cultivate Hope

My ability to think and imagine is a resource belonging to the commons, of which I am a steward. I have a responsibility to increase my resistance to discouragement and despair. I actively seek out stories of solidarity, generosity, creative social projects, inventions that serve people instead of corporations, discoveries that support my view of human nature and possibility, and in my capacity as a public artist, I spread them around. Most bad news is repetitive. I learn nothing new from the details of massacres, torture, corruption. They don't give me new insight into the possible. They just depress me. So I don't read emails that invite me to watch horrifying footage. I turn to news sources that often have inspiring stories. I monitor Telesur, Latin America's left TV network, which highlights my continent's resistance to US domination and the many amazing ways that wealth, access, and participation are being redistributed in places like Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador. I read *Portside*, an often uplifting online digest of news and analysis for the left that includes music videos, cultural analysis, interesting science features, and accounts of local struggles and

inspiring history. I travel to Cuba when I can, to experience life outside consumerism and a culture where human solidarity is an actively cultivated value. And when people tell me hopeful things, I decide to remember them.

Practice Consciousness Raising

By "consciousness raising" I mean the exchange of stories within a social group that allows us to map out the ways that social injustice impacts us personally, as we did in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union consciousness-raising group I joined at fifteen. The more I understand about the way that internalized oppression distorts my thoughts, feelings, and actions, the better able I am to compensate for its effects and develop specific strategies to undo them. Knowing, for example, that the Ashkenazi Jewish history of cyclical expulsions, massacres, and attempted genocide has left us jumpy, urgent, inclined to leap into action too fast and talk a lot helps me monitor my own urgency and disbelieve it. Knowing my ancestors survived by trying to be indispensable helps me rein in my tendency to take on way too much.

I make frequent use of reevaluation counseling, a set of anti-oppression, peer-counseling tools shared throughout an international organization of people collectively researching how to heal from the effects of a hurtful past so we can totally claim the present and shape the future. I have co-counseling sessions several times a week, and some of my counseling partners have been doing this with me for decades. I tell and retell my stories, sob, shake, and laugh aloud, and new insights emerge, and that brings flexibility to wounds that have become rigidly scarred. I also listen and learn from other people's lives, because the exchange of stories is the currency of transformation.

Build Solidarity

I try to practice the words of my former colleague Victor Lewis: Solidarity must be unilateral, unconditional, and universal. I try to be on everyone's side, recognizing that interrupting someone's inappropriate or oppressive behavior *is* being on their side. It's standing up for their full humanity. I try to take every opportunity for connection. I ask the cashier at the market how her day is going, ask the paratransit driver to teach me a word in his language, stop and chat to picketers, smile at harassed parents on the bus

and assure them their children have a right to make noise. I look for the stories underneath people's stories and reach for points of connection. Of every proposal for any kind of social action I ask whether it will increase the sum of human solidarity, because solidarity is the antidote to oppression, which always seeks to dehumanize and divide us.

Collectivize My Struggles

Our society is constantly telling us our struggles are individual problems—defects of character, personal deficiencies, bad luck, too little ambition or energy or focus. Every chance I get, I seek out other people dealing with similar issues to my own and look for ways to join forces, because the more I participate in small examples of the kind of world I want, the more I experience in my daily life the difference it makes to work with others, and the more rooted in possibility I become. The privatization of suffering is a hallmark of capitalism, and the isolation and exhaustion it brings with it are real dangers, not only to our morale but to our survival. Every time we can join forces to create joint responses to formerly individual challenges, something significant shifts.

Connect with My Ecosystem

I tend my connection with the rest of the natural world of which I am part, and cultivate my awareness that it is not an "environment" but an intricate, living web of beings, a kinship. When I step away from my computer to stand barefoot on soil, to visit trees and streams, oceans and swamps, when I notice the movement of clouds and light and air, I regain my sense of relatedness. The separation that the attempted conquest of nature imposed on us begins to break down. Part of that tending is to grow plants and gather them, to use plant medicine and think of the donors of leaf and root and stem as living allies, not raw ingredients. Another part is to know the sources of what I eat, what the plants are like, what peoples first cultivated them, whose hands planted and harvested, packed and transported the food to my table. Every acknowledgment of connection is a victory against the assault on our bonds that domination inflicts on us all the time.

I remember that history is wide and deep, that there are many other lives being lived around me, and that generations stretch backward and forward from my moment in time. How I live my life right now extends

the impact of my ancestors and enriches the soil my descendants will plant their own lives in. Thinking this way makes the difficulties of the moment shrink against that grand background.

To quote from my poem "History Lesson":

A thousand years from now
people will be telling this story,
how we were the first to circle the globe with protest. . . .
At such a distance they won't imagine how you feel tonight,
sifting through my voice on the radio for what you need. They won't imagine
the way we couldn't decide, moment to moment,
if we were losing or winning.
Our great-great fifty greats grandchildren will only say
they were brave, and something changed. It was a beginning.

MY FEMINISM

0

This is about feminism, and therefore about the social condition of womanhood. There are oppressions specific to people born with female bodies, historically defined women who make up a huge proportion of humankind. And there are many oppressions, many aspects of male domination and sexism that affect all humans identified and/or identifying as feminine. There is no inherent conflict between the different communities of people directly impacted by male domination and the related systems of control of sexuality and gender. In this piece, I write about "women" and use it to mean all the people affected by what I am discussing at that moment.

1

Feminism came to me with my mother's milk, that thin bluish thread of sweet nutriment that entered my body in the tropical dry season of 1954, when the US women's liberation movement was more than a dozen years away and postwar femininity lay in a thick, suffocating layer over women's lives. But my mother was a communist. She had found feminism out of the roots of her own rebellion against an autocratic father and her contact, in her late teens, with other communist women for whom what

was known as the Woman Question was central. My parents met when they were both eighteen, and their second date was to hear Black feminist communist Claudia Jones speak. It was as they sat on a park bench discussing the lecture that my father proposed and they became engaged.

Sitting in the next rocking chair while I nursed was Jane Speed of Alabama, a red-headed communist book seller and organizer who had made Alabama too hot to hold her, gone to New Orleans and Philadelphia, and eventually met and married a Puerto Rican communist writer and labor organizer, and with her mother Mary Craik Speed in tow, landed on this tropical mountaintop next to my mother. Jane wanted to organize urban working-class women in San Juan and became a Tampax saleswoman in order to get them alone so she could talk to them about their lives. There's nothing like menstrual blood to drive the most domineering man from the room. My mother organized an agricultural extension class for women, teaching them to sew and make stovetop ovens out of cracker cans, so they would leave their houses for a few hours and talk to each other. Within the anti-imperialist and economic justice visions of her radicalism, her actual work always started with women.

Jane's husband, César, was a Communist Party honcho who publicly supported official positions even when he disagreed with them. My mother was shy and young and out of her element, but the day they met, when someone asked what symbol they should choose to represent their flaccid coalition candidate on the ballot, my mother said, "How about a lemon?," and César was so angry she thought he would hit her, but that was my mother. She knew what she knew, she thought what she thought, and, as she wrote decades later, she was what she was.[1]

She taught me to identify the markings of sexism the way she taught me the markings of birds, the colors of paint—in the course of daily living. She muttered and fumed and criticized and made her sharp remarks in my hearing, so that I watched the young male leaders who came to sit at my father's feet, saw them ignore her intelligence, her clarity, her penetrating questions that first captured my father's heart, learned what happens to women's minds in the presence of sexism, how we are silenced or made to stutter with self-doubt or become engulfed in rage or are made bitter with disappointment, and what a difference it makes when we can recognize and name it. I didn't know it until later, but part of the reason we left Puerto Rico when I was thirteen was that we were surrounded by

women who had left school by eighth grade, who had babies year after year and spent themselves maneuvering around their husbands for tiny bits of autonomy, and she wanted me to have other examples of what women could do and be.

For my mother, feminism was the essential heart of all fights for liberation, so imagine her delight to find herself in the midst of a women's eruption: Chicago in the late 1960s. The pamphlets, the meetings, the mimeographed articles, the heated discussions, company at last. "All those years," she told me, "I was a feminist without a movement." I remember her sitting on her bed in Hyde Park with stacks of books all around her, bristling with her notes on scraps of paper, head tilted, intent on her work.

She didn't read feminist thinkers as an academic exercise. She wanted theory that could reshape the world, that could be applied like a chisel to stone. She wanted insights, strategies, answers. She was fiercely radical on every front, cared passionately about the injustices of class and race in a deep, visceral way, hated capitalism and war and environmental destruction, fought for the precautionary principle that toxins are guilty until proven innocent, and organized cancer activism long before she herself became sick. She was a working-class, Puerto Rican feminist woman and a "communist with a small c," so her feminism encompassed all oppressions, and the liberation of women was the red heart of it all.

What she was up against was formidable. She had chosen the University of Chicago with high hopes for a future in radical anthropology, only to land, the first week, in a student strike because most of the courses advertised were unavailable. The professors were all off in the field, and the students' tuition had been taken under false pretenses. So she was swept up into a fight from the first moment. But the real wall was the contempt in which those big men of anthropology held her, a working-class, Puerto Rican faculty wife. And the wall behind that was that the anthropology she was offered was what she called a necrology, studying the remains left in the wake of genocide without ever naming it. Her thesis was a scathing critique of the racism and colonial complicity of Claude Lévi-Strauss, god of structuralist anthropology, and it barred her from the field.

But in the midst of it all, the turbulence of my adolescence, the collapse of our family's systems of care, her fight for her mind, everything, she took me by the hand and led me to the Chicago Women's Liberation Union,

where I joined my first consciousness-raising group. There I learned again and again that my struggles were collective, not individual, that there were big forces coming to bear on each choice we made, the work we did and what, if anything, we were paid for it, the things we studied, who we dated and how, what we wore and what it meant, what we dared to hope for, to imagine, what we took credit for, how we were or were not recognized for what we did, what we said out loud and who listened, and who did the dishes every single day. Together we mapped the terrain, found and began to scale the walls that hemmed us in, named and began to shift the loads that kept us bent, and because my mother had taught me to know the markings, I recognized the bird.

2

If I had not been her daughter, I would not have survived. A few months ago, I read that suicide is the leading cause of death worldwide for young women ages fifteen to nineteen. Just at the point when reproductivity begins, when gender roles, discrimination, and sexual violence intensify, girls kill themselves. In an article in the *Guardian* Jessica Valenti quotes Dr. Suzanne Petroni, senior director for gender, population, and development at the International Center for Research on Women. "There's increased violence, child marriage, sexual abuse, exploitation, limitations on reproductive control, and girls excluded from education."[2] Valenti goes on to say that in places where abortion is completely illegal, like El Salvador, unwanted pregnancy is a leading cause of suicide—and sexual abuse is a leading cause of unwanted pregnancy.

I grew up the blonde child of a university professor among impoverished coffee workers. Privilege is a convoluted thing. Because my parents had resources and recourse, the man who terrorized my childhood couldn't do so openly in his fourth-grade classroom, the way he tormented my classmates, so he did it privately, and because I was blonde, and light-skinned, and "americanita" in spite of my Puerto Rican mother and two-thousand-year-old Caribbean roots, I had extra value within the great swirling horror of the international sex traffic in children, of which he managed the local branch. By threatening to kill my family, he gained the use of my body, and I spent five years being secretly raped, tortured, and photographed without my parents' knowledge. But in my case, the

torment ended before I became fertile. It ended, and we left, and I had the immense good fortune of having been born in time for the great wave of the US women's liberation movement to break around me when I was fifteen, just as I entered that zone of greatest risk.

I had already survived extreme sexual violence within the cesspool of the child sex trade. I had survived the culture shock of my uprooting from rural Puerto Rico and begun to navigate life in the university neighborhood of Hyde Park in Chicago. But even with middle-class parents, I ended up living on my own, in poverty, at the age of sixteen, struggled to have my mind in the face of heavy-handed racism and sexist gender tracking at school, and was raped again at sixteen by a spoiled suburban white boy. Without the power of that movement breaking open all around me, declaring again and again that our suffering was social, I might have become one of those young, female suicides.

3

It's not that feminism comes first. There is no first. All of who I am demands liberation at the same time. But the liberation of women, the elimination of sexism and male domination, are widely trivialized, seen as "soft" politics compared to struggles around race and class. Ridicule and trivialization are central to women's oppression. The issues that impact us are privatized as personal, and the personal is dismissed as unimportant. Today the women's liberation movement of my youth is dismissed as a white women's thing, and people like my mother and I are written out of the story. This is partly because of real critiques of white dominance and racism within that movement, partly the result of the professionalizing of feminism into an academic discipline and away from its social movement roots. But a big part of it is that, with the help of media and educational system–induced amnesia, it's easy to ridicule feminism, to flatten and reduce a richly complicated history, to dismiss it as outdated and irrelevant. Feminism never belonged to white women, even if some of them thought it did, and many did not.

My feminism is the feminism of Claudia Jones, whose experiences of intense racism and working-class poverty led her to communism, who proposed Black self-determination as a guiding principle of communist organizing and was jailed for an anti-imperialist Women's Day speech.

She criticized the left for failing to uproot male supremacy, and the elite feminists who ignored race and class and framed their struggles as a war between the sexes, and wrote that "the triply oppressed status of negro women is a barometer of the status of all women."

My feminism is the feminism of Puerto Rican writer Clotilde Betances Jaeger, who, in 1929 responded to the racist comment of Carrie Chapman Catt that Latin American women were not helping to build peace, by stating that while peace was a central principle for Latin American and Caribbean women, it was based on freedom from US imperialism.

In the revolutionary, plurinational state of Bolivia, one of the divisions of the Ministry of Culture is the Vice Ministry of Decolonization, the task of which is to undo the damages of five centuries of foreign domination. The vice minister writes on their website that the two axes of decolonization are the dismantling of racism and of patriarchy; that decolonization cannot take place without exposing, pushing into crisis, and dismantling the structures of male domination. That only in this way can humankind transition to the planetary culture of solidarity, well-being, and ecological sensibility we require in order to survive. This is my feminism.

4

In my experience, feminism is more often vilified as corrupt than other movements, sneered at for its privileged sectors and the persistent presence of Women of Color within white-dominated movements and in feminist movements of our own is erased from the record. How many in the United States are aware of the militant labor feminism of Puerto Rican women in the first decades of the twentieth century, of the international antimilitarism of Latin American feminists in the 1940s and 1950s, of the massive protests happening right now in Argentina and other Latin American countries against femicide and rape under the slogan "Not One Less," not one less of us in the world because of gender violence?

How many know that the UN Commission on the Status of Women is the work of Latin American and Caribbean feminists, leaders in a Pan-American women's movement between the two world wars? It was these women, Minerva Bernardino from the Dominican Republic, Amalia Castillo de Ledon from Mexico, Isabel P. Vidal from Uruguay, and Bertha Lutz from Brazil, not white US feminists fighting overly narrowly conceived

gender equality, who helped to establish the category of women as a global class whose human rights need defending.

The women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was more quickly professionalized by academics than other movements because there were many primarily white women who had fought their individual ways into academia, for whom women's studies programs offered some shelter from the daily grind of sexist abuse, and, as women's studies began to carve out space in colleges and universities, moved laterally into better working conditions without necessarily having the activist passion of the field's founders.

But during that same period, nonprofit funding professionalized antiracist and environmental radicalism into an endless cycle of trainings and studies that never led to real challenges of white supremacy or corporate ecocide and changed the criteria of leadership from community accountability, integrity. and vision to an ability to get grants. Labor unions purged radicals and accommodated bosses, and between assassinations, imprisonments, and funding, the social upheavals of that era were repressed and bribed into disarray. Feminism was not unique in being co-opted and commodified, and as with other social movements, there were many of us who resisted.

Within the array of US social movements feminism has its own history and dynamics, but there is a special disdain for its failings that is saturated with a deep contempt for and trivializing of women that often coexists with good, radical politics on other issues, while the errors of radical men generally get a pass in collective memory, and the *serious* activism of anti-imperialists and antiracists is often shielded from legitimate critique in the name of their significance. Consider the way that the violent and often criminal misdeeds of some sectors of the Black Panther Party are swept under the carpet of progressive narratives for the sake of its undeniable revolutionary impact.

Like Claudia Jones and the Pan-American feminists, I will always fight for feminism to be my own, and for feminism to belong to all of us, to Black women founding the Movement for Black Lives, to primarily Black mothers organizing against toxic contamination of their neighborhoods, and demanding land reform in Nigeria and Brazil, to indigenous women like Berta Cáceres and Kandi Mossett, fighting imperialist and genocidal assaults on the water, land, and life of their people, to women from

Puerto Rico to Palestine, simultaneously resisting the colonial domination of their countries and the male domination of their comrades, to women of every sexuality and gender expression, to poor women, illiterate women, to the women most consistently targeted with extreme physical and sexual and psychological violence.

I have never for a minute subscribed to valuing unity above the necessary critiques of oppressive behavior. That's an old trick that stinks of its true purpose, which is domination. But neither have I ever agreed to surrender my movement because that oppressiveness exists within it. All social movements harbor the injustices we need to dismantle in order for our lives to be possible. This is the work. To turn ourselves into the people we don't yet know how to be. To build a solidarity against all oppressions into the heart of our feminism that is both rigorous and compassionate. To keep fighting for it to be what we need it to be.

5

As a poet, I know the power of metaphor, so this is as good a place as any to say that I don't believe that oppressions intersect. They aren't streets. You can't take a stroll along Gender Avenue free of all other histories, free of our real bodies with all they know, and then turn at the corner of Race or Class or Sexuality and do just that for a few blocks. "Intersection" implies that there are other places where these things don't coexist and interpenetrate. All people live somewhere in the terrain of class, race, gender, sexuality, within or outside the bounds of normalized bodies and minds, whether we pay attention or not, whether we are privileged in that spot or not.

I believe that oppression is more like a landscape, with its layered geology, its pollen drift, its leaching of minerals from one level to another. I am the child of an evolutionary mathematical biologist who spent his life looking at complexity, whose teaching of ecology included the distortions of capitalism on science, the relationships between women's property rights and soil fertility, and the disastrous mistakes made by asking the wrong questions, based on the wrong assumption that just because things are the way they are, it's the way they have to be.

For me, the perspective and political practice some of us currently call intersectionality is fundamentally ecological, is insisting on the organic,

interactive, complex, and interdependent nature of oppression, and therefore, by both necessity and our own nature, of liberation. So although the endless plundering of resources that is class is the bedrock that most other oppressions exist to serve, I will never say that any one of the oppressions wrecking our world must always come first in terms of action. The shifting historical moments and social contexts through which we move, whom we can build effective alliances with, what issues are the most pressing on us and on the people around us, which struggles are most likely to kindle hope, all determine our points of entry into the multilayered, infinite-issue, shared work of transforming the world. Each kind of oppression has its strategic importance in the reproduction of domination and props up the others, just as each struggle has moments of igniting a broader swath of resistance and leading that moment. Every ecosystem has its feedback loops and tipping points, moments of crisis and renewal and transition into different successional stages, its key species whose absence or alteration would set off cascades of consequences that change everything.

As a young adult, I was fascinated by the life stories of early twentieth-century radical Jewish women in the United States and tried to root out and decipher how they chose on which ground or combination of grounds they made their stands: feminism, Jewishness, class. I have shifted ground my whole life, migrating between movements, none of which stood for all of me, rejoicing in those moments of confluence when several rivers of resistance flowed into each other, heartbroken over and over at the predictable betrayals arising out of narrowed vision and unchallenged entitlement. Women of Color, disabled queer People of Color, Jews of Color, Latina feminists, radical Jewish artists, queer Jewish Middle East peace and justice activists, Latin American ecosocialists—I have navigated by all of these constellations and felt sheltered by them. Each of us has our own shifting maps of the essential, the sustaining, and the intolerable.

On every part of my own map, I have had to fight for the complexity of my lived experience, fight to bring in what someone is hoping I will leave outside the door, and yet it's my femaleness that is least accounted for, even though almost all my work is done with women. Feminism continues to be seen as less urgent, less life-and-death important than race or class, even though the subjugation of the female kills people with impunity every single day. Even though rape is so widespread and unpunished

that a presidential candidate can boast of it during his campaign. Even though women are over half the population of the world, do two thirds of the work and own only one tenth of its resources.

6

In 1969, when I joined the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, women were routinely fired for getting married, let alone being pregnant. There were no female gynecologists, and we were taught nothing whatsoever about our bodies; those of us who asked questions were told not to trouble our heads, and if we persisted, it was made clear to us that we had forgotten our place and were behaving badly. Even middle-class, white, married heterosexual women, privileged in multiple ways, needed letters from their husbands to get birth control because women's childbearing was seen as the property of their spouses. Single women trying to access birth control faced all kinds challenges and mistreatment. Meanwhile Black and brown women were sterilized with impunity, often without our knowledge.

Women couldn't get credit in our own name, which meant that middle-aged married women who divorced had no economic standing at all, even if they had jointly run businesses with their husbands, even if their income from their own work had been paying the bills for thirty years. Job listings in the newspapers were separated by gender, and women's job options were limited to housekeeping, secretarial work, and caretaking. Female students were denied places in advanced courses, mocked and cold-shouldered by male students, and sexually harassed by professors. Abortion was illegal and extremely dangerous, and pregnancy outside of marriage meant exile, loss of family and friends, social ostracism, an end to one's education, job loss, potential institutionalization, and often the forced surrender of the child. Reporting a rape to the police was guaranteed to be a prolonged nightmare of public humiliation that rarely resulted in any penalty for the rapist.

Many of the victories we won in those years are now under assault, but the fact remains that as of today, there are women doctors and lawyers to whom we can turn, many ways to learn about how our bodies work; adult women can get birth control without anyone's permission; many women have children alone or with each other; women study science,

engineering, law, and our own history, and do many kinds of work we had no access to in 1969; and abortion, while increasingly restricted and inaccessible, is still a legal right. We women have our own bank accounts, own things in our own name, have our own credit ratings, and can file and sometimes win lawsuits for gender discrimination.

That the women's liberation movement, which was a loose network of many different groups and projects, included privileged straight white women who tried to limit the empowerment of working-class women, lesbian and bisexual women, indigenous women, and Women of Color by treating our struggles as distractions doesn't change the fact that our tumultuous coalitions, in which the rest of us never stopped pushing back, accomplished these things.

7

Male domination is so old, so global, so all-encompassing, so intimate, and at the same time so crushingly structural that we have nowhere to stand outside of it except in our imaginations. The fight starts there. Remember, I say again and again, that the nature of sexism is to belittle and make fun of everything female and everything associated with femaleness, so that it never feels as important to be feminist as to be antiracist, anti-imperialist, anticapitalist. Remember that the nature of sexism is to keep privatizing and personalizing the societal and then simultaneously blaming us for it and dismissing it as trivial. Remember what this feeling is. Where it comes from. What it means.

For instance, that the fear of sexual assault is so ingrained as to seem normal. Normal to look in every direction when walking down a street, normal to assess every man who comes close to the edges of my perimeter, normal to fear the creaking of a stair as the step of an intruder, normal to fear men in groups. That the feeling of being prey is just a normal part of the landscape. Even if it goes underground in the company of people I deem safe, it's always there, ready to rear up, the knowledge of my rapeability, and the utter lack of social outrage about it, the cultural acceptance of rape as a consequence of biological sexes, the impunity, the deliberate use of rape as a weapon in warfare, declared and undeclared. The use of rape to break entire peoples to the harness of domination. The centrality of

rape to racism, to imperialism, to social control. The commercialization of rape as an industry mass-producing predators and prey, and the public relations division of all this violence, pornography, advertising itself everywhere.

Sexual violence is a massive global practice that every single day, every hour, is causing catastrophic harm to humankind, multiplying trauma, damaging whole webs of human beings, wounding us as individuals and communities. Sexual violence *is* war.

Sexism chops it up into billions of personal events. Not even tragedies most of the time. Just the thing that happens. Something vaguely connected with primates and cavemen and hunting and the so-called natural urge to conquer. Something that women cause to happen to us by not being careful, by being prey in the presence of predators, by our weakness and lack of character, by existing in our female or feminized bodies, by our having been in the wrong place, even if that place is our home, our street, our town, our world.

The last time I went to Cuba, as my father and I rode in the taxi to our hotel, we saw a teenage girl walking along a dark street at midnight, and we looked at each other and said, "We're in Cuba." I'm sure that sexual assault has not been completely eliminated in Cuba, but young girls walk down dark streets and are not tensed to kick and scratch and bite their way out of an attack. Because of choices human beings have made, their bodies stay relaxed in nighttime Havana in ways my body could never do in a US city. Human beings can choose to end sexual violence. We just haven't yet.

8

When I think of the economics of sexism I think about the women of the Puerto Rican countryside, of Carmelita and Gina and Ginín. *Women do more than two thirds of the world's work and own a tenth of its wealth.* These women of my childhood worked the coffee farms, raised hens and pigs and goats, soaked beans, peeled green bananas and root vegetables, cooked all day, washed clothing by hand, which is hard work, fetched buckets full of water from springs, mended garments, tended injuries and illnesses, soothed emotions, motivated the unmotivated, did their best to

protect their children from drunkenness and belt buckles, grew peppers and peas and herbs, bathed babies, went to market, negotiated credit, and had almost no access to cash. Sexism and capitalism unite to make nothing of the work women do.

9

That the revolutions of the past hundred years failed miserably to hold the liberation of half of humanity at their core is a disaster, maybe the single worst mistake in our long reaching for social justice. Sexism makes it seem trivial that men committed to ending oppressions of class and race and empire refused to give up the exploitation of women—of our reproductive and emotional labor—refused to exchange domination for the companionship of equals, have been willing to sacrifice the immense, world-changing potential of women engaged in our own liberation, our energy, our ideas, the things we know as a result of our different history of living in the world, all that vast reservoir of human creativity—in order to stay in charge. It isn't trivial. It's suicidal.

My ardent mother stepped farther and farther back from the independence movement and rural organizing she could have led, and led brilliantly, because of the soul-destroying predictability of ridicule, disrespect, trivialization, blocking—because anything she said was ignored or attributed to her husband, since it was impossible she should have ideas of her own. Because the men around her thought her purpose was to serve them coffee. She wrote a story about a woman whom the fiery young radicals of her invented Caribbean nation literally couldn't see. My story was about a Chilean revolutionary I worked hard to support in a spirit of clean solidarity and who did his best to seduce me and five women in five other US cities, while managing a wife and a mistress at home, lying to us all, reaping our support of him like a cash crop, and leaving the soil of us wearily depleted, knowing ourselves robbed. My story was about solidarity being a two-way street and the sheer stupidity of treating one's necessary allies that way. And I walked away from Latin American solidarity work because the way those men wasted and demeaned me was making me bitter and I knew that was dangerous to my survival as a whole human.

10

I don't know how male domination began, or why it's so widespread. Humanity has lived with it for so long that it's hard to imagine its simple absence—not a utopian fairy tale, just a society of equals, in which being female in body and/or gender is simply an interesting and valuable way to be human. I don't know how it began, but I know that all the men who told us it could be sorted out "after the revolution" were wrong. Without feminism, there *is* no revolution. Not one that will reach deep enough to remake the world.

Societies like ours defuse social protest by a combination of repression and co-optation. Deep convictions are repackaged as matters of style. Grants are bestowed and leaders destroyed. A revolutionary upsurge becomes a career path. Splits are fostered, personalities attacked, great debates about principles made into academic arguments read only by other academics, while we are on the brink of losing every gain in reproductive sovereignty that the movement of my teens won for us, and the accelerating flow of wealth to the wealthy leaves women and our children parched, hungry, sick, jailed, and exhausted.

I don't speak out of nostalgia when I say this. I don't speak in the way of retired activists gilding the past. I say this to summon the wave, to call up the necessary eruption, to make trouble: I remember what it was like when hundreds of thousands of women struck sparks from each other, chisel on stone, asking these questions: What if we're not depressed, but enraged? What if we question everything we think we know about being female? What if we were not afraid? What if we were willing to change everything? What if we knew with every fiber that we were in this together? What would the world look like then? Who would we be? What if we never again settled for less than everything? Those questions saved my life and shaped it. It's not that we've stopped asking them, but we need to ask them everywhere, together, in large numbers, led by those women who have the richest, most ecologically complex understanding of how multiple systems of oppression interact to impoverish our collective soil.

In Rojava, the Syrian portion of Kurdistan, the people have created a de facto autonomous region where it looks like feminism has in fact been made into its heart. Surrounded by war, they are building a participatory democracy in which all councils are led by a woman and a man, where

women have autonomous organizations at every level of decision making and full representation in all shared decision-making bodies. I read about a large communal meeting led by an old man and a young woman, and how, when a question was raised, the old man looked at the young woman and waited for her to speak. My whole being turns toward that jewel of a moment, and I recognize the quickening of my pulse, as I did when I saw Venezuelan revolutionary feminists reading their manifesto on national television, or learned how Zapatista women are transforming the villages of Chiapas.

Now, when the accumulated stupidities of a system based on greed, domination, and violence threaten our existence more thoroughly than ever before, feminism, the liberation and empowerment of all womankind, with all that we have been shaped by history to bring with us, is as essential to our survival as breath. We can't live without it, any more than we can live without air.

African women produce 80 percent of the continent's food but face heavy discrimination in access to capital, land ownership, and other resources. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, if women had the same access to and control over productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 percent and reduce the number of hungry people in the world by between 100 million and 150 million. Women in many poor countries are increasingly calling for feminist land reform as a solution to world hunger and ecocide, understanding that when women are in charge of managing land and growing food, everyone benefits. We can't live without feminism, any more than we can live without eating.

What if we put feminism, my kind, the kind that arises out of all the specificity of our lives, that erases nothing of our differences, that knows these are our riches, what if we put my kind of feminism, my mother's kind, at the heart of every single gesture toward social justice, every project, every organization, every protest? Openly and explicitly. What if we decided feminism is inseparable from justice and knew this was good news? What if we were all firm in our clarity that male domination is absolutely unaffordable and has to be ended as quickly as possible, and we started dismantling it every chance we got, starting right now? What if we knew that global feminism, led by indigenous, Black, and brown women, is the one renewable fuel with the power to shift us toward sustainable revolution?

11

I said that learning about feminism was like birdwatching for me. But what if we are the birds? A few days ago, walking home through the dusk, I passed a marsh, and rising out of the swampy water and thick reeds, dozens of red-winged blackbirds took to the air together. The beating of all their wings made a rushing sound that has stayed with me. I've read that when Europeans first arrived on this continent, the sky of Turtle Island was filled with flocks so vast that their passage made its own wind and covered the sky from rim to rim, taking entire days to pass.

This, then, is what I dream of. Multitudes of women, all kinds of women, arguing, disagreeing, fighting it out, lifting our thoughts up out of the fields and cities and prisons and homes, not to carry the sky but to fill it, making our own wind, strong enough to topple towers and pollinate a whole new world into bloom.

NOTES

1. Rosario Morales, "I Am What I Am," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radial Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

2. Jessica Valenti, "Worldwide Sexism Increases Suicide Risk in Young Women," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/28/worldwide-sexism-increases-suicide-risk-in-young-women.

IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY

1

We live among crisscrossing vectors of inequality, these million specific excuses for injustice, these false divides that weigh our worth on brutally tipped scales. They pull and push at us from different directions, saturating our inner and outer worlds with hierarchies that have no basis in who we really are but have been slammed into us so hard that navigating them becomes our main activity. Each one of us is tipped low on some scales, higher on others; each one of us is arbitrarily robbed and rewarded, punished and privileged for attributes beyond our control. But the injustice of the robbery and punishment is far more obvious to us than the injustice of our unearned privileges and rewards.

We want, with emotional immediacy, to organize along the vectors of our own oppression, demand change where we are most obviously injured, demand priority for our own wounds, the ones we can feel. We are bitter about the privileges of others, about their obliviousness to the meaning of what they have and are inevitably oblivious to whole provinces of the social terrain where our own privileges settle like fog, to hide the landmarks of other people's suffering. All too often we fight for primacy, insist that the vectors along which violence hurtles toward us matter more than any others, are more urgent. We refuse to listen until

we are heard, will not *be* allies until we *have* allies. Knowingly or unknowingly, in anger or desperation or ignorance, we keep mobilizing the master's tools to stake our claims to liberation.

2

The truth is that we are also bleeding from the wounds of privilege, that obliviousness takes out chunks of our social immune systems, eats resilience, makes us stiff and stupid in each arena where we have been trained to stop thinking. The brilliant antiracism leader who says disabled people are too angry, complain too much, bring their own oppression upon themselves, as if she has never heard those same words turned on her. The white Jews and Arab Muslims who agree that Jews of Color are a distraction and should shut up. The brown nationalist men who think challenging male domination undermines the real work. The gay men who use sexism to deflect homophobia. The women-from-birth who refuse to share the terrain of people targeted by sexism with trans women, accusing them of being secret agents for patriarchy. The trans people who dismiss the struggles of billions of female-bodied women as passé and focus their rage on the feminists who exclude them instead of the power structures that are killing us all. The activists who think about everything except class, who have no sliding scales, hold meetings on weekdays, and think single parents lack commitment. The white environmentalists who can't tell that Black and brown people's lives are endangered. The white girl tabling for cetaceans who looked right at me and said there were plenty of brown babies in the world but very few whales, that we could spare the babies, that in spite of wars and famines causing millions of deaths, it was only the whales who were running out of time.

The tunnel vision of considering only our own oppression, and the sense of urgency that brings, can always make solidarity seem unaffordable, inclusion a risk not worth taking. Privilege and its stupidities are what really distract us.

3

For oppressed people, defining the boundaries of group membership is often a life-and-death decision, shaped by both the necessities of survival and the lessons in exclusion that we absorb from the masters. The more embattled a community is, the more narrowly it patrols its borders. As a group of people engaged in a liberation struggle builds its reservoirs of consciousness, creating room for new thinking and new social relationships, those boundaries often become more permeable. And that brings its own blessings and challenges.

In the early 1980s identifying as bisexual meant that I was excluded from many lesbian spaces, and those were the only queer spaces available to me. Border people like me were seen as a threat to dyke solidarity. It was assumed that under pressure we would retreat into heterosexuality, play it safe and abandon our sisters. The result was isolation. The accumulated shifts in consciousness of the past three decades now allow for a much more flexible range of nonheterosexual identities. If young queer activists of today don't consider my sexuality untrustworthy, it's because thirty years of hard work have made it politically affordable for our communities to be more inclusive.

But there is also great value in creating what the early women's liberation movement called "free spaces," where people with a common history of oppression, resistance, and survival, and the culture those forces create, can think, feel, and act together without having to explain, defend, or do battle with other people's habits of domination. Those spaces are essential for us to be able to think clearly and develop ideas and practices that are really our own.

So an expanded inclusion has both great benefits and great risks. On the one hand, it brings in fresh approaches and new perspectives and enriches the field of imagination from which revolutionary vision arises. On the other hand, it breaches the container of common understanding, and some of what comes through is in fact the oppression we try to hold at bay. Its presence in our home spaces can exhaust and demoralize us.

4

These containers of identity are so much more complicated than they seem at first glance. They are powerful grounds on which to stand and find people to stand beside us. They are shorthand for massive deposits of experience. When I say Puerto Rican, other Puerto Ricans, other Latin Americans, other Caribbean people, other People of Color understand that I come from a tropical colony of Spain and then the United States, that both indigenous genocide and the African slave trade live in my house, that my light skin privileges me in many spaces but does not exempt me from other kinds of US racism, and that certain things can be expected of me as a result. This, in spite of the immense diversity of Puerto Rican experience, the deep divisions of class, racism, sexism, migration histories, levels and kinds of assimilation, and responses to colonialism.

Identity is a form of resistance to the heavy-handed erasures through which oppressive societies try to strip us of anything that reinforces our unique humanity. But identity is not fixed. It's contextual, relational, historic, circumstantial, subject to change, and we forget that. We forget that it is the marketplace of domination that sorts us into separate bins, categories of exploitability, that divides along this line and not that, and insists our social conditions are inherent.

At the same time, the shorthand of identity can become a way to wield a kind of victimized entitlement, to say, because of historical trauma, I can speak and you cannot. In the crisscrossing of privileges and oppressions, the badge of woundedness can combine with privilege and lead to self-righteous abuses of power. We live in a society that commodifies everything, even resistance. In the amnesiac whirlwind of our consumerized lives, identity is always in danger of becoming just another weapon, another kind of coin. Identity is tricky business.

5

I have been thinking a lot about the term "People of Color," which caught on in the United States in its current sense in the late 1970s, at a time of broad coalition building among the many peoples targeted by systemic racism in the United States. We had rejected "nonwhite" as utterly cen-

tered on whiteness, "minority" as numerically inaccurate and minimizing, and wanted a more positive definition of who we were than "people targeted by racism." "People of Color" (POC) gave us a joyful, unifying language that underlined our collective majority status, and it's been a powerful tool in many ways, bringing a broad range of people into the same rooms to craft a shared antiracist struggle, but it is also politically flawed, and this has had consequences.

For instance, it has generally excluded Native Americans or assumed that racism as experienced by Black, Latinx/Chicanx and Asian American people is equivalent to the attempted genocide targeting North American indigenous people, ignoring the reality that whether we came voluntarily or were brought here by force, the land on which we built and fought was and is still being violently seized from its first people. POC silence about the indigenous world in which we landed and the five-hundred-year Native struggles against settler colonialism is a form of collusion and has to stop. The foundational crime of this country is indigenous genocide. When the first slaves were dragged onto American soil, it was already well soaked with blood.

Within this multihued tent we call "color" there are people of many different skin tones, facial features, body types, and textures of hair; very dark-skinned people of sub-Saharan African and South Asian ancestry, medium- to light-skinned people of Middle Eastern, East Asian, and North African heritage; and all kinds of ancestral mixtures of Europeans with everyone else, leading to a wide range of appearances, which makes the "color" in "People of Color" a metaphor. But it is also an essentialist term, borrowing the master's language once again, and linking a specific physical attribute, skin color, to all targets of white supremacy. It allows us to forget that these attributes are excuses, not reasons. The categories of humans that these excuses create can impose similar historical experiences on different people, leading to some shared perspectives, but the categories themselves are not real.

White supremacy, and all the varied forms of racism it generates, are flexible tools, serving the overriding desire of ruling classes to own all wealth and dominate everything. The rules, explanations, and policies of white supremacy constantly shift to meet the current needs of dominators. They exist to provide justifying stories so the elites can dehumanize groups of people for the sake of wealth, and power over wealth.

In the Iberia of the 1490s, as the Christian aristocracy fought for economic and political dominance over formerly Islamic-ruled lands and commercial routes, religion, transformed into a biological trait, made it far more dangerous to have the "impure blood" of a Jew than to be a sub-Saharan Black African. History quickly reversed this as exiled Spanish and Portuguese Jews sought to recover their losses as junior partners in the massively expanding Atlantic slave trade, created and dominated by Catholic and Protestant merchants.

In this time of intense anti-immigrant racism toward Mexican and Central American migrants, and the tokenizing myth of an Asian American model minority, with the Mexican economy in colonized ruins and China on the ascendant, it's hard to imagine that in the 1840s, legislators in the new state of California saw Mexicans, which included the remaining wealthy land grant families, as white, and Chinese laborers as not.

In addition to using essentialist ideas to fight racism, "People of Color" also blurs important historical distinctions, pretending that our experiences are all comparable. Many of us are positioned to both benefit from and be targeted by white supremacy. As a light-skinned Puerto Rican, I am not an immediate target of racist violence when I walk down a street. I'm what I call a second-glance target—facing racism that kicks in when I show my ID or say my name, or a third-glance target, having to share information about myself before I become vulnerable. I have certainly experienced racism, been told I brought cockroaches with me to my college housing, been expected to be incompetent by employers and professors, been told that the literature of Latin America is impoverished and irrelevant and that my people are all violent, oversexed criminals and lazy moochers on Uncle Sam's coattails. I've been blamed for the impacts of racism on my income, my health, my parenting, and as a sick and disabled, underresourced, Puerto Rican single mother, I have certainly experienced my own version of the "welfare queen" narrative when I asked for support. White supremacy was the justifying narrative for the ransacking of my country and the impoverishment and dispossession of my people, many of whom are also Black.

But I am not Sandra Bland when I drive down the freeway; I am not Oscar Grant when I ride a train; and I am not the Black man who was shot and killed by police the week we arrived in the United States for running home to catch his favorite TV show because the Chicago cops

assumed he was fleeing the scene of a crime. Within the vast tent of People of Color are descendants of enslaved and enslaver, colonized and colonizer, of people long at war with each other. The difficult terms of solidarity require much more honesty, much more specificity, much more nuance, a much more complex and sophisticated understanding of how and why white supremacy functions and the differences and similarities in what it does to us.

This blurring of experience also conceals the unique historical significance of Black struggles in the United States. All People of Color, and the many nations of North American indigenous people, have powerful legacies of resistance that contribute to our collective strength, but Black antiracist struggles have laid the foundation for a lot of social justice work in this country, and that debt often goes unacknowledged or is irresponsibly appropriated. Non-Black People of Color sometimes build on those foundations without crediting them or committing to the fight against antiblackness, including in our own communities, and the language of "people of color" helps make that possible.

On top of that, as white liberals continually scramble to take over and monetize antiracist struggles into professional gigs for themselves and diversity training programs they can administer, the term has been even more watered down, an easy, often analysis-free category used to generate supposedly benevolent activity aimed at keeping us calm and white people safe.

Metaphors like "people of color" help us name connections and give us a shorthand for shared knowledge, but they're not always precise enough for the real work we have to do.

6

Debates about "identity politics" often focus on the ways it can conceal the underlying engine of class, and this is a valid critique, but I grew up among organizers whose single-minded focus on class covered up the many wheels that engine turns. Envisioning a revolution led by white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, industrial workers of the Global North, they failed miserably to understand that this doomed their efforts from the start.

Every movement has these failures. The accumulated pain and urgency from long-standing historical oppression combine with the justifying myths of the rulers that we've internalized about each other make it hard to act, on a daily basis, on the principle that it really *is* all of us or none. Our movements need to incorporate safe ways of venting our rage, grief, and fear so that they don't guide our strategic decisions, so that in their wake we find clarity and a will to resist our own narrowing of purpose.

The work of identifying and removing the invasive and parasitic beliefs about each other that we have been deliberately infected with can be painful and mortifying, but it is also joyful beyond measure. When the fog is burned off, what remains is an illuminated social landscape, where the entire geology of our lives is laid bare. This is the landscape of solidarity, where no life is a distraction, where we move in and out of our necessary home spaces, continually expanding the area of the liberated commons, that world-in-creation where all of our identities simultaneously mean everything and nothing because every excuse for injustice is gone.

THE POWER OF STORY

I still remember how the earth moved that day. I was sixteen, sitting in a consciousness-raising group of a half-dozen young women who were all part of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, talking about the places where we struggled in our lives. One after another we said variations of the same things, and slowly comprehension dawned that what we had been experiencing as personal shortcomings were the markers of a shared social oppression. We were just fine. Our situations were not.

This is a moment that organizers strive for, when the systemic forces behind individual misery become clear, when people's dissatisfactions turn outward, away from self-blame, blame of other oppressed people, blame of "human nature," and toward the workings of an unjust society.

We try many different strategies to make that shift happen, but the successful ones all begin with the particulars of people's lives and follow them down into our shared root systems. There are stories that reveal the scapegoats we have been reviling as fully human and struggling like ourselves. There are stories that show resistance is not futile when we assumed that it was. There are stories that make connections between experiences that seem completely separate and expose the underpinnings of domination. There are stories that crack open lies and make complacency intolerable. There are stories that build trust, allow catharsis, honor grief, validate

rage, offer unexpected and heart-melting examples of solidarity and bestow courage.

In the late 1970s I worked at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, California. It had been founded by Chilean political exiles and North Americans who had lived in Chile or other parts of Latin America and were part of the US movement to support the Latin American left during a time of brutal right-wing military dictatorships. Among the exiles were skilled musicians, and they would give performances interspersed with someone reading facts and figures to demonstrate the harshness of life under Pinochet. No one listened to or retained the statistics.

A group of us wanted to do more effective work, combining the beautiful, passionate music of the Chileans with real stories, images, drama. So we created a performance based on Victor Jara's album *La Población*, about land takeovers by the poor. Instead of reciting the number of landless people and what percentage of the population owned what percentage of the wealth, we dramatized a land action and the real raid by the authorities in which a two-year-old child was killed. As we sang, slides were projected on a screen behind us, including one of a half-naked little girl standing among the ruins of a shanty town. Our first performance was at a conference of organizations doing Latin America work. The program had run late, and people were starting to drift out, putting on their coats as we began. And for forty-five minutes, they stood in the doorways, coats half on and tears in their eyes. These were experienced activists who knew the statistics. What they had been missing was the stories that gave those numbers human faces, hands, bodies.

In the months following 9/11, I had the opportunity to write poetry about the news for Pacifica Radio's *Flashpoints* news magazine. Every week I'd scan the headlines looking for ways to crack them open and find the people who lived inside them.

On the eve of the US bombing of Baghdad, I found a short item about pregnant women going to hospitals to induce labor so they wouldn't have to go out into the streets during the bombing. I wrote a poem that began, "Someday a thousand children of Baghdad will ask why they all have the same birthday."

While the United States dropped "care" packages of peanut butter on them, I was told that child refugees from Afghanistan were wetting their beds with fear, and I wrote:

Afghani children do not want peanut butter.
They want their sisters back.
They want back their fathers and mothers.
They want their infinite cousins
to come back from the place of blood and shredded garments.
They want their playmates back from under the piles of stones.
It is simple. They want their mother singing as she makes bread.
They want the houses to stand up again.
They want the sky.

Every time I read my poems on the air, the station was flooded with calls. People said they had to pull over because they were crying. Where figures about casualties left people numb and helpless, offering them names and faces and details allowed them to feel, to be moved, to be connected.

We had worked hard to prevent this war, and it had started anyway. Many people felt discouraged in the midst of their outrage. The networks were telling a story that made the war seem like a video game, with imaginary evil enemies exploding to the sounds of bells and buzzers. Even those of us who knew that the people dying were not our enemies had a hard time holding them clearly in front of us.

When I wrote:

Collateral damage has a name and her name is Anahita
collateral damage's name is Tahir.

When I wrote:

Each child lying in her blood
is a universe ended. Hassan, Salah, Jameel.
They were galaxies that will not return.

it helped us write our own story, in which precious people were being killed and injured. Changing the story let people who felt frozen under the weight of events break free. It let them weep.

In 1935 German communist poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote an essay, "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties," about the challenges facing writers during a time of political repression and manipulation. He said, "The writer who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties." These were "the cour-

age to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the cunning to spread the truth among such persons."

Courage is necessary, but if we can't recognize the truth, or know which truths matter, it's not enough. Even when the truth is clearly perceived and there is the courage to speak it, we have to choose which truths we tell based on the impact they will have. What do these truths allow people to think about? What actions can they ignite? Who is it most strategic to reach with each particular truth?

Brecht wrote, "We must tell the truth about evil conditions to those for whom the conditions are worst, and we must also learn the truth from them. We must address not only people who hold certain views, but people who, because of their situation, should hold these views. . . . Even the hangmen can be addressed when the payment for hanging stops, or when the work becomes too dangerous." If people don't hold the views we expect their lives to generate, we need to listen more deeply, listen to the layers of stories underlying the ones they tell, until we find the layer where our truths meet.

Finally, Brecht speaks of cunning, the skill to evade repression but also to work around people's resistance to the truth, to make intentional choices about whether and how to encode our messages, based entirely on what will be most effective. Some radicals insist on using the clichéd language of bloody chains and groaning masses, phrases that make them feel militant but limit their audience. Sometimes it's more effective to say "profit-driven society" instead of "capitalism," "making war on people to steal their stuff" instead of "imperialism." Brecht asked writers to act based on the results we want to achieve, not just on what makes us feel good in the moment.

The work of the organizer is always to identify the existing story and, in collaboration with others, propose new ones that allow people to see different possibilities and make new choices. Doing this well means listening more than making speeches—really hearing the narratives people are living by.

Actions are also a form of storytelling. Sitting in the front of a bus, lying down in front of a train, stopping work, leaving a school building, blocking the loading of a ship—these are all new stories about reality that contradict official versions meant to uphold the horrible status quo.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Chilean sailing ship *Esmeralda* was used as a torture center where many political prisoners suffered horrors at the hands of the Pinochet regime. During that time it also made international voyages as a historic "tall ship." When it arrived in San Francisco, a group of protesters paid admission for the official tour, wearing jackets over T-shirts, each of which bore a single letter. Then they stood in a line and opened their jackets, revealing a human banner that said STOP THE TORTURE SHIP. Their action disrupted a story of graceful sails and tall masts, an apparently innocent celebration of shipbuilding craft and Chilean seafaring, and in one simple act, recaptioned the event.

Actions tell stories, but often we don't pay enough attention, as Brecht advises, to the difficulties of telling the most useful truth. Each time we craft a slogan for a march, we need to think beyond our own expressions of outrage and the structures of rhythm and make sure the story we're chanting is the most effective way to change how people around us think.

During the summer 2014 escalation of the war on Gaza, one of the least effective chants I heard, which made most demonstrators cringe, was "Hey, Israel, what do you say? How many babies did you kill today?" It expressed outrage, but in a sarcastic and self-righteous way, and while it certainly brought forth the horror of the events, it didn't give people anywhere to go. During that same time, Jewish Voice for Peace did an online campaign with photographs of people holding up signs with the names and ages of those who had died in the bombing. It also addressed the horror, but it showed individual human beings mourning other individual human beings. It made the deaths real and personal and was deeply moving and effective. So was the sign I saw that linked Gaza with the Warsaw Ghetto. The sign did not call Israelis Nazis, a stupid and offensive mistake, but compared the suffering and resistance of Warsaw Jews, who dealt the Nazis their first significant defeat in Europe, with the suffering and resistance of Palestinians in Gaza. It offered a different perspective to Jews who are proud of the Ghetto Uprising, and through that pride drew them toward identifying with the people of Gaza.

Listening to, analyzing, creating, and disseminating stories, and doing so with courage, keenness, skill, and cunning, with the clear purpose of changing human consciousness in the direction of choosing justice—this is what organizing is all about.

THE TRUTHS OUR BODIES TELL

This piece is based on a keynote talk I gave at the National Coalition for Latinxs with Disabilities in Berkeley, California, in June 2017.

I am the daughter of Rosario Morales, an indigenous-heritage working-class Puerto Rican woman, a multitalented feminist radical with migraines, depression, and anxiety, born in Harlem, and Richard Levins, a first-generation middle-class Ukrainian-heritage Jewish communist scientist with heart disease and diabetes, born in Brooklyn. My mother died of a blood cancer linked to one of the pesticides marketed and often imposed on farmers in Puerto Rico and around the world, by companies repurposing World War II nerve gasses and expertise to kill insects while promising better living for all.

I am both disabled and chronically ill. I live with epilepsy, with the aftereffects of multiple brain injuries and a stroke, a predisposition toward diabetes, and a childhood of self-medicating with sugar, but most of all, of massive pesticide exposure during my childhood, made worse by impaired liver function and of extreme sexual abuse at the hands of international traffickers in child pornography which overpowered and impaired my body's natural defenses and set all my body-mind systems on red alert. And then we migrated to Chicago, where the air was full of

tiny black particles blown from the steel mills and coal furnaces, and my schoolmates sang *Puerto Rico, my heart's devotion, let it sink into the ocean.* Puerto Rican, Jewish, female, epileptic, and bisexual, living on my own at sixteen, I could have been sterilized five times over by twentieth-century eugenicists who didn't stop cutting epileptics in Illinois until 1970.

These assaults on my personhood are the result of a global drive to turn every possible gift life offers into private money and extract from our bodies and our planet, our cultures and our ordinary needs, every single penny's worth of profit, no matter what the cost. In Puerto Rico that drive is expressed through colonialism.

We are the ones whose body-minds don't comply with that project, the ones who can't be standardized, whose uniqueness, variety, adaptation get in the way of efficiently exploiting our labor, so we're defined as liabilities.

Like all living things, we are repositories of stories, archives of what I call histerimonias, because "testimonio" comes from the custom of Roman men swearing on their testicles, which I don't have, and because the idea of hysteria has been used for many centuries to dismiss and silence those who are considered unreliable witnesses, especially women.

Who here has heard of Puerto Rican syndrome, the only ethnically titled psychiatric condition in the DSM, first observed by US army psychiatrists among young Puerto Rican men drafted into the US military and about to be sent to war in Korea? Where I grew up, that was called an ataque. People who had them screamed and fell on the ground, writhed and jerked, cried out, and tore at their hair and clothing until it passed. It was a culturally respected response to an unbearable shock or loss, but instead of tracing its roots into the colonized soil of my country, instead of tracing it back to the stripping away of land and customs and sovereignty, instead of understanding it as the right response to the mass sacrifice of our young men's lives in wars for imperial control, foreign experts studied, footnoted, and analyzed it into a disorder, something wrong with *us*.

But what if we rolled back the diagnoses and opened the floor?

What if each body could speak in its fullest voice and be heard?

Every form of social injustice demands that we silence our bodies, from our infancies when we were taught to eat, sleep, move, be still, piss and poop, be quiet or talk to suit adult needs and not our own. From the first schoolroom in which learning was divorced from movement, from

nature, from touch, and we had to sit in our rows of desks for hours. From the start we're taught to manage our flesh for other people's benefit, to train ourselves to be the workers the system needs. We are denied and learn to deny ourselves fresh air and exercise, clean water, and healthy food, rest. From the start we are taught to subordinate our truths, change our names, tame our tongues, told to stop crying because it doesn't hurt when it does, told that we can't have the lives we want because we aren't people enough.

As Latinx humans, born from the confluence of indigenous, African, and Iberian ancestors, and embracing many other streams of migration, the supremacy of the white, Protestant, Northern European elites already violently targets our bodies and minds as dangerous, wrong, and disposable. Our entire histories are preexisting conditions that, according to the rulers, disqualify us, not only from Republican health care but from full humanity.

Those of us whose body-minds are, in addition, an explicit problem for the profit machine are punished for it. Warehoused in institutions, left alone in our rooms, seen as bad investments and refused resources, the job of inclusion is left in our laps so that we have to construct every single door we need to go through, build it from scratch, over and over and over again. We are written in their ledgers as obstacles. We get in the way of extraction. Or so I hope.

Because this is one of our gifts to the world. By our very existence, we challenge the ruling definitions of human worth, the nature of work, of ability, of aliveness, what it means to produce, what we should value. We survive, when we do, because we are able to build webs of relationships, able to tend to each other, feed each other, able to chain ourselves to fences in loudly chanting groups, able to insist on our own stories about who we are.

Our movement has power and potential far beyond creating access to the status quo. We have the power to lead every movement for justice toward sovereignty, respect, and tenderness for all bodies, all minds, to practice universal inclusion now, while we're struggling to shift and repair and remake the fabric of the world. We have the power to teach our movements, to teach the people around us who believe they are invincibly able-bodied, how to listen to and trust their own bodies and minds, respect the limits of capacity, how to rest and have needs, how to move from our centers and build social justice practices that are rooted and resilient.

All organisms are inherently sovereign. All organisms resist harm and repair damage. This is our nature. And our nature is to tell stories about it. Because the story of what is broken becomes something whole. The story of what was forgotten becomes memory. The story of how we survived becomes communal medicine. The story of what we lost becomes new soil. The story of how we are the same as everyone and the story of how we are unique are a braided lifeline.

Our stories are not just personal compasses. They are navigation for the world. What does your body have to teach us about architecture and language, time, and flexibility, and the act of breath? How would we have to shape our society for nothing about *you* to be disabling? Where does your body want to lead us, and how would the world be different if it did?

The story of what my injured brain does with information is a story about human brains. The stories about genetic roadblocks that slow down my ability to shed toxins, about the thud of my head landing from five feet nine inches onto a concrete floor, about what strobe lights and perfume to do my nervous system, about how after the stroke I painted my tiny hallway yellow, one trembling brushstroke at a time, how it took weeks, propped on a walker, about the deep pleasure of laying that sunlit color on another six square inches of wall and then lying down to rest, these are all part of the great encyclopedia of human bodies, and each of you has a volume full.

In 2009 I went to Cuba because the balancing act of getting authorization for forty-five-minute, once-a-week sessions of physical therapy, in which there was only time to teach me how to adapt, had ended with a half share in a power wheelchair, not because that was all that I needed but because that was what they were willing to spend on me. My father had been training Cuban ecologists for decades, and so he asked the Ministry of Public Health to give me rehab, and they said yes, and I prepared by reading the published papers of experts at the clinic where I was headed.

During the same week in which, after filling out reams of forms all designed to make me give up and feel guilty for having asked in the first place, I was once again denied disability benefits, I read a Cuban article about how to persuade an injured person to accept free medical care and take on the hard work of rehab. The author said that every human being has irreplaceable gifts, and if rehab would allow someone to more easily

offer them to the world, then it would be a great benefit to society, a public good.

I spent ten weeks in a clinic where therapists hugged patients, where privacy was replaced by solidarity, where the children of the staff climbed on the equipment without being scolded, where I had thirty-seven hours of rehab a week and was encouraged to sing about it, and people listened to what I had to say about the pain of my body struggling back toward integration, how numb and scalded my skin felt, how tired I was. The point isn't that I learned to walk again. The point is how. That I was held in a web of relation, where nothing was wrong with me.

There are ways that my body will not ever shift toward the so-called norm, white patches on my MRI that will not darken back into the rest, liver pathways that will always be sluggish and leave piles of debris deposited in my own tiny superfund sites, trails I will never hike. Some of the ways I am impaired make it a lot harder to survive the toxicity that greed creates.

For this body of mine to have real, full inclusion requires a whole new and ecologically responsible economy, one that listens to my body speak about dieldrin and DDT, benzenes and parathion and takes heed. But this is true for us all.

If disability is defined as people who, because of variations in our body-minds, can't be efficiently exploited, the last thing we need is better access to exploitation, greater integration into a profit-driven society that is driving thousands of species toward mass extinction and making the planet uninhabitable for humans. The last thing we need is more opportunities to do our part in keeping the interlocking wheels of class, white supremacy, heteromale supremacy, and imperialism turning. This doesn't mean that we don't fight for what we need in order to survive, that we don't fight for the crappy job or inadequate benefits that will keep us alive for now. Life jackets keep us from drowning, but the only lasting access is universal inclusion, which means universal justice.

When I was getting ready to leave Cuba, the staff psychiatrist told me that I needed to cultivate solidarity in my life back home, that the key to well-being was to find people who shared my values, find important work to do together, and have fun doing it.

Integrating disabled people into the leadership of every social justice movement, with Black, indigenous, and People of Color folks, women

and working class people up front, watching us disrupt every single way that our movements still replicate exploitation-based ideas of work, intelligence, productivity, action; watching us expand our challenge to the way things are so fast and furiously that it's like an explosion; watching us push our collective thinking light years outside those boxes we can't get into anyway—that's about as fun as it gets.

FALSE MEMORIES

Trauma and Liberation

What would happen if one woman told the truth
about her life? The world would split open.

—MURIEL RUKEYSER

1

The structures of unequal power are many-layered and complex in the ways they function in the world. But at its root oppression is really quite simple. It's about looting. The rest is made up of the rules and institutions, rituals and agreements, mythologies, rationales, and overt bullying by means of which small groups of people keep a firm grasp on way more than their share of the world's resources.

But just as intense heat makes ripples and waves that distort our view of the road and give us the illusion of water when there is only hot asphalt, oppression of any kind tugs at the culture around it, distorting our view of the naked exercise of power, normalizing it so that it appears natural and tolerable. Making it look like the reason we're thirsty is not that we're being denied water, but our own lack of initiative or worthiness in the midst of plenty.

Those with privilege cover up the bare bones of what they're up to with all kinds of elaborate theories and justifications, until they persuade themselves that living at the expense of other people is the right thing to do, a luxury they have earned by virtue of their own excellence, a natural way of life, the righteous and inevitable order of things. Some go so far as to convince themselves that exploitation is not only justifiable but a kind

and compassionate expression of their superiority. These lies saturate our culture in ways both subtle and obvious.

The slavers who kidnapped millions of West African people, transported them under conditions that made a third of them die of the journey, gang-raped and tortured them, then sold them into a lifetime of unpaid labor and brutal social control, and the slaveholders who bought them, worked them mercilessly, again raped them at will, routinely tortured them as punishment, sometimes for acts of resistance as small as looking a white person in the eye, sometimes merely to emphasize their power, and who, because of the work of slaves, led lives of leisure—found endless ways to justify their behavior, even to the extent of claiming that slavery was a civilizing and benevolent influence in the lives of the enslaved. In a massive act of projection, they often described the African people who did every stitch of their work for them as lazy; seriously believed that slaves *needed* European people to set them tasks and make them useful. They even fantasized that had Europeans not enslaved them, African peoples would have died off from their inability to fend for themselves. After Abolition, many ex-slaveholders complained of the ingratitude of their former captives.

Or consider the almost hallucinatory fantasies of wealthy members of Congress that teenage African American mothers who receive welfare, a small minority of the welfare-receiving population and consuming a minuscule fraction of the public budget, are responsible for bankrupting the economy, growing rich at public expense by having babies in order to pad their AFDC checks. Excluded from decent employment and denied the most basic necessities so as not to slow down the astronomical rise in income of the top 10 percent, these young women are held publicly accountable for the pillaging of our common resources by the greedy.

The mechanism is the same whether we talk about individual or collective atrocities. Feminist psychologist Judith Herman describes the ways in which perpetrators seek to control disclosures of abuse:

> In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure no-one listens. To this end, he marshals

> an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case, it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.[1]

Similarly, collective abuses, from the violence of poverty to police brutality, from colonial invasion to slavery to genocide are denied, dismissed, blamed on the victims, and erased from public discussion.

Such lies are part of the apparatus that justifies the massive accumulation by a few people of wealth beyond any human individual's needs. In order for the thing to work, the humanity of almost everyone must somehow be made invisible. Who could bear to hold privilege that meant the suffering and death of others if they had not been trained from early childhood to see these others as unreal and undeserving? Who would tolerate for even an hour the inhuman conditions imposed by the privileged if they had not been trained from early childhood to feel themselves not fully entitled to life?[2]

The culture that inequality creates around itself is saturated with pain, confusion, alienation, a sense of the unreality of our own experience and that of others, an inability to name the abuses we experience, perpetrate, and witness on a daily basis. Part of what leaves us numb is the massive scale on which these abuses occur. We are a society of people living in a state of collective posttraumatic shock: amnesiac, dissociated, continually distracting ourselves from the repetitive injuries of widespread societal violence.

When individual people are abused, the events themselves become a story of our worthlessness, of our deserving no better. We must struggle to re-create the shattered knowledge of our humanity. It is in retelling the stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage, that this becomes possible. The struggle we engage in is over whose story will triumph, the rapist's story or the raped woman's, the child abuser's or the child's, the stories of bigoted police officers or those of Black, indigenous, and People of Color families whose children are being murdered.

When the stories of the abused are transformed and push their way into public space, their power to undermine the dominant narrative and shake up how people perceive reality can be tremendous. This is the power of Black Lives Matter—young Black people whose casual murders by the police had been normalized into invisibility demanded in every public forum they had access to that their humanity, and the value of each and every one of their lives, be recognized, and successfully mobilized large numbers of people to address systematic, officially sanctioned, and funded racist violence. The disappearance and killing of young Mexican activists has been going on for a very long, awful time. But when the families of forty-three education students from Ayotzinapa refused to let them just vanish and demanded an accounting for their lives from every authority, took to the roads and went from state to state speaking of official violence and demanding that their children be given back to them, they ignited an international furor over a long-ignored policy of repression. The Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina stood in front of the seat of authority every week, holding photographs of their missing children and grandchildren, and would not allow the policy of disappearance to erase them. From Ferguson to Buenos Aires to Guerrero, refusing to accept victimization or forget the dead changes the story.

2

Memory, individual and collective, is one of the most important sites of social struggle. The "false memory" movement of the 1990s that sought to deny authority over memory to sexual abuse survivors; escalating attacks on teaching the history and literature of indigenous people and People of Color, that frame sharing any information about oppression or the cultures of the oppressed as violence against "Western civilization"; Holocaust denial that pretends the attempted Nazi genocide against primarily European Jews, Roma, lesbian, gay, and disabled people never took place; the bizarre pseudoscience of misogynist politicians claiming that pregnancy results only from consensual sex—these are all examples of the attempted erasure of collective memory and knowledge and represent backlashes against powerful popular movements attempting to wrest control of history from the ruling class.

The past is a powerful resource with which to explain and justify the present and create agendas for the future. The frequency of reports by adult women and men that as children they were sexually abused by their families and social institutions requires a story. That story must either radically rethink what goes on in families, churches, and schools or place responsibility for these reports in the psyches of the women and men making them. Feminists have sought to do the first, and the false memory movement sought, by inventing a new category of invalid experience, to do the latter.

Multicultural education, particularly the revision of history and literature curricula to include the presence and voices of women, indigenous peoples, immigrant People of Color, poor and working-class people, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, grew out of broad social movements that erupted in this country during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s and that responded to decolonization processes internationally. Women's studies, ethnic studies, LGBT studies, and the various ways in which working-class culture and thought have entered classrooms, have presented major challenges to elite control of knowledge, to what story is told about US society.

As the movements that created such academic disciplines have weakened, attacks on them have increased. As in the case of the false memory movement, the privileged accuse the disempowered of oppressing them. Teaching the histories, cultures, and thought of the 99 percent violates the "freedom" of privileged white heterosexual men by forcing them to participate in a world in which their interests and perceptions are not the exclusive priority of everyone.

In 2010 Arizona passed a law forbidding the teaching of a Chicano studies course in the Tucson school district and banned a long list of books, claiming that teaching about racism *was* racism because it discriminates against white people, presumably by making them face the human cost of racial injustice. That it was not the existence of systemic white supremacy but rather *talking about it* that caused conflict within communities. We are increasingly seeing lawsuits and disciplinary actions against educators for teaching about reality, with white students claiming that teaching about the history and current structures of racism creates a hostile climate for them. The right-wing Zionist Lawfare Project

sued Rabab Abdulhadi, director of San Francisco State University's Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diaspora Initiative, for teaching about Islamophobia and colonialism, claiming, as Zionists do with increasing aggressiveness, that any critical examination of Israel/Palestine is tantamount to genocide against Jews.

Those who have considered it their private preserve to decide what is and isn't knowledge, art, or culture have persuaded themselves that our determination to define these things for ourselves is a threat to their sovereignty. In reality, it's their best chance for survival. The narrow mythologies upon which they have based their lives will not see them through another century. The denial of our interrelatedness is killing this planet and too many of its people.

Holocaust revision, the story that accuses Jews of manufacturing the history of Nazi atrocities and genocide as a bid for power and "special privileges," uses a similar reversal whereby Nazi Germany becomes the victim of those Jews who survived the attempt to exterminate them. The Holocaust is searing evidence of what theories of genetic inferiority and the dehumanizing of whole populations can bring about.

The United States was built on denial about indigenous genocide, which was its foundation, but saying so can get you fired. The 97 percent of all scientists who agree that the extractive economics of capitalism have created massive changes in our planetary ecosystem are accused of "junk science" by the mouthpieces of infinite exploitation, who have banned the phrase "climate change" from use by federal employees.

For Jews, for incest survivors, for Black people in the United States, for Native women, for all the people systematically excluded from official histories, the issue is the same. Oppression, whether on the massive social scale of the Holocaust or in the power abuses of incest within one's home, is deeply traumatic. Traumatized individuals and communities experience themselves as dehumanized by abuse. The story told by the actions of the perpetrators is that those who are targeted are not human beings. Evidence that such a belief is a central ingredient in oppressor ideology, and essential, in fact, to carrying out their programs, is to be found everywhere, from Nazi propaganda to slaveholder mythology to the persistent belief that women ask for and enjoy rape.

Because I am in multiple ways the target of such dehumanization, I read history books with the skepticism of an incest survivor at a family

gathering. I watch everyone's hands. I know the purpose of many of the stories being told is to establish the appropriateness of sacrificing me and my people to someone else's interests. Recovery from trauma requires creating and telling another story about the experience of violence and the nature of the participants, a story powerful enough to restore a sense of our full humanity to the abused.

3

Our capacity as a society to think about traumatic events and their effect on people has been disrupted by both the silencing imposed on us by perpetrators and the effects of trauma itself. The tendency is for prolonged abuse to become normalized, and even more so when it is perpetrated on a collective scale by those with the greatest power. Judith Herman looks at the checkered past of the psychological study of trauma, describing it as one of "episodic amnesia":

> Periods of active investigation have alternated with periodic oblivion. Repeatedly in the past century, similar lines of inquiry have been taken up and abruptly abandoned, only to be rediscovered much later. . . . This intermittent amnesia is not the result of the ordinary changes in fashion that affect any intellectual pursuit. The study of psychological trauma does not languish for lack of interest. Rather, the subject provokes such intense controversy that it periodically becomes anathema. The study of psychological trauma has repeatedly led into realms of the unthinkable and foundered on fundamental questions of belief. (7)

This is because examining psychological trauma inevitably leads us to the most widespread source of trauma, which is oppression. Therefore it is only in the context of social movements against oppression that psychological trauma can really be examined. Herman argues:

> The systematic study of psychological trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement. Indeed, whether such a study can be pursued or discussed in public is itself a political question. The study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war. The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in the context that

> challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial. In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness. (9)

Denial and amnesia, repression and the dissociation that keeps our perceptions fragmented so they will not reveal the terrible whole, all of these must be overcome in order for the stories of the traumatized to occupy public space.

4

Healing takes place in community, in the telling and the bearing witness, in the naming of trauma and in the grief and rage and defiance that follows. In *Trauma and Recovery* Judith Herman draws from the experiences of women and men traumatized by many different kinds of events, from rape and battering to combat, from kidnapping to incest. She has found that both the effects of trauma and the recovery process from it are largely consistent across all categories of trauma. If abuse is in fact only the local manifestation of oppression, then such stages of individual recovery should also hold true for collective processes of recovery.

The significant difference, however, between a local manifestation of oppression such as incest, battering in a home, or bullying in school and the overarching systemic abuses of sexism, racism, poverty, or homophobia is the possibility of leaving the abusive situation. For individuals, recovery generally begins at the point where the abuse has been escaped or stopped. Collectively we are often attempting to recover from abuses that are ongoing, and the only context in which this is possible is one of active opposition. Taking action, saying no to oppression, is an essential first step. A stance of opposition creates a small liberated territory, a psychological space in which we can act on the belief that we deserve complete freedom and dignity even when achieving it collectively is still out of reach.

The refusal to cooperate with our dehumanization even when we may not yet be able to stop it increases our reserves of dignity and hope. In that moment, we have begun the process of recovery—of reclaimed humanity—that is both the ultimate outcome and the most essential ingredient of our liberation. And although there is a critical role for allies in bearing witness to and taking a strong moral stance against the abuse, the core of this activism must be the traumatized acting on their own behalf.

Writing of the therapeutic relationship for traumatized individuals, Herman states that the client must be "author and arbiter of her own recovery. . . . No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest." I am reminded of a quote from an unidentified Australian Aboriginal woman activist: "If you have come here to help me then you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."

What is clinically referred to as diagnosis, the naming of the problem, is the essential stage of reconnecting symptom and cause, pain and its source.

Identifying the cause-and-effect relationships between nightmares and incest, depression and the dehumanizing effects of oppression, fear and the experience of violence, frees the traumatized from the pervasive social denial that trauma exists, is part of the business as usual of oppressive societies, and has profound, corrosive effects on individuals, communities, cultures, whole societies, humankind, and all life on earth.

My own relief at the discovery, in therapy, that my inability to sleep and the persistent intrusive violent images that thrust their way into my mind were a common, known, and documented response to severe abuse was identical with what I felt in my first women's consciousness-raising group. As each woman in turn spoke about her life and we recognized how much we had in common, we became able to name the sources of our anger, frustration, and self-doubt as arising from our mistreatment by men in our lives and by our systematic mistreatment by a male supremacist society. Our exhilaration came from the realization that our individual pain was not after all the result of a character defect but a direct result of systemic injustice, and that our reactions made complete sense.

Oppressed communities have created many forms, from support groups to written testimony, from "speak bitterness" sessions to autobiographical

anthologies, through which the connections between conditions of oppression and their impact on the oppressed can be made explicit and public.

While the false memory theoreticians attempt to establish that pain is ahistorical and traumas leave no trace of themselves in our lives, the traumatized keep finding ways to insist that pain has documentable origins, that when someone is hit, it hurts, that injuries leave scars.

Without this naming process, the effects of trauma come to seem like personal flaws or cultural defects, inborn in the traumatized, not violently created. Survivors of long-term abuse, unable to identify the external sources of self-hatred, shame, anger, and fear, may pose a significant danger to themselves through direct self-harming, passive failures of self-protection, or a toxic dependence on the abuser. Traumatized communities certainly enact these same behaviors. Internalizing the perpetrator's rationalizations, they may come to believe they are the source of their own problems and treat themselves and each other with disrespect and violence. Drug abuse, alcoholism, gang violence, domestic violence, and a stunted sense of what is possible can all arise from an inability to identify the causes of pain, understand their origins and development as human projects that can be undone, have a sense of collective power, and take an active stance to end them.

Racism frames violence within communities of color as inherent to our identities because it denies the cumulative impact of genocide, slavery, lynching, and other forms of organized violence, enforced poverty and segregation, and the systematic denial of opportunities. It is only by recognizing the traumatic impact of oppression that we come to see that all violence, all dysfunction arises from historical causes. It was the identification of those sources that radicalized former street gangs, giving rise to powerful movements like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords.

In order to establish a culture of resistance, a climate in which the oppressed are able to diagnose our own ills as the effects of oppression, we need a body of diagnostic know-how, a tradition of recognizing and understanding in detail the harmful nature of oppression.

For me, one of those tools has been reevaluation counseling (RC). RC is an organized form of peer counseling aimed at freeing us from the effects of our hurts, so that we can think freshly about the present moment rather than reacting out of old trauma. Over more than half a century, members of this international community have mapped out the common

patterns of injury of a wide range of specific groups of people, creating a sophisticated body of knowledge about the many ways internalized oppression shows up in our lives. The more we understand about our histories of both oppression and resistance to it, of injury and resilience, the better we come to know our real capacities, and the better able we become to act powerfully and build real alliances.

5

The way we are taught our history is an endless repetition of the perpetrator's story, in which crusaders are shining knights, not massacring mercenaries, wars are glorious and heroic, not massive assaults on human beings and the natural world for the sake of domination, and conquerors are bold visionaries, not perpetrators of large-scale armed robbery. As far back as we can see, the past unrolls in an infinite time line of thrones, treaties, and battles and the acquisition of exciting new markets and territories. For the subjugated and colonized, the presentation of such a story as one of admirable accomplishments is an added injury. Just as the individual recovering from abuse must reconstruct the story of her undeserved suffering in a way that gives it new meaning, and herself a rebuilt and invulnerable sense of worth, the victims of collective abuse need ways to reconstruct history that restore a sense of our inherent value as human beings and immunize us against the elite mythology that our only worth is in our ability to make them rich.

When individuals take on such projects of recovery we often find it far more challenging than we may have expected. Herman writes, "Denial makes them feel crazy, but facing the full reality seems beyond what any human can bear." The heart of the challenge is to assimilate the terrible, the unbearable, and through telling our own stories about both our losses and our survival, to transform it into something that can be integrated and ultimately nourish our humanity. As a collective process, it allows us to hold a vision of humankind and the world we live in that is beautiful and full of possibilities far bigger than even the whole weight our histories.

Recent work in neuroscience reveals that while we need to accept the reality of what's happened to us, the brains of individuals who recount their past traumas show the same patterns as people dealing with current

trauma. The telling itself creates the neurological and physiological responses of traumatic stress. This underlines the truth that it's not enough to name abuse. We also need to reframe it, to create practices that emphasize our inherent resistance, our resilience, our ability to choose how we respond based on what is best for us and our people, rather than just reenacting and reacting out of our traumas.

6

Ours is a society that does not do grief well or easily, and in order to transform trauma we need to be able to mourn, fully and deeply, all that has been taken from us. But mourning is painful and we resist giving way to it, distract ourselves from it in dozens of ways.

Herman talks about some of the ways individuals resist mourning: Out of pride because we will not give them the satisfaction. Through fantasies of revenge rooted in a sense of helplessness, as if to perpetrate abusive acts ourselves would restore our power. Through dreams of absolution in which the impact of abuse is erased through an act of love and the abuser is finally repentant. Through fantasies of compensation that allow us to avoid the truth, which is that nothing can ever compensate us.

But only through mourning everything we have lost can we discover that we have in fact survived, that our spirits are stronger than we thought. Only through mourning can we reach a place of clear and centered power, in which we stand with all the abused and hold all abusers accountable. Only through mourning can we reconnect to the love in our lives and lose our fascination with the ones who harmed us, and only if we fully acknowledge and grieve our hurts can we possibly find genuine compassion for the perpetrators.

What does grief have to do with history? Everything. In the early 1980s my mother wrote "Concepts of Pollution" about her experience of studying anthropology:

> Did you know Levi-Strauss wrote an essay on the pregnant boy myths of the Pawnee Indians, myths about how some boys got supernatural help to become doctors—so called medicine men—without a word about doctoring among the Pawnees in the 1800s, without a word about the desperate hopelessness of it with people dying of all the diseases of

> starvation, the hungry, cold winters and the attacks of the Sioux? And I was there to be a scholar, there to be an anthropologist. Not there to be a person, a woman. Not there to care that I was Puerto Rican, a child of Taíno Indians, of Spaniards, of African slaves. Not there to question, to argue. Not there to identify. Not there to cry. Certainly, not there to cry. No wonder I drank. . . . I'd write after staying up drinking, talking to myself in the mirror, shouting angrily. . . . Then I would write about Pawnees dying in the thin winter sunlight, coughing up blood, or Polynesians dying on the beach in the Pacific, shot by passing whalers, or Caduveo dying of Spanish gunshot. I wrote about Wounded Knee and Canyon de Chelly, places I had names for, and all the beaches and valleys and rocky plains in Africa, in Canada, in Australia, on the Pacific Islands, on the Caribbean islands, in tropical South America, in Arctic North America, places for which I had no names. A soundless litany of death . . . Drink deadens the pain, and now I don't drink and the pain returns undeadened, unalloyed, clear and punishing. How can I bear it? How do you mourn endless numbers of people in endless numbers of places? Is there a form for it, a requisite time and place for mourning? Is there ever an end to it?[3]

If we attempt to craft resistance without undertaking this task, we are collectively vulnerable to all the errors of judgment that unresolved trauma generates in individuals. It is part of our task as revolutionary people, people who want deep-rooted, radical change, to be as whole as it is possible for us to be. This can be done only if we face the reality of what oppression really means in our lives, not as abstract systems subject to analysis but as an avalanche of traumas leaving a wake of devastation in the lives of real people, who nevertheless remain human, unquenchable, complex, and full of possibility.

Radical history has the potential to do this work. Radical historians, whether academically taught or trained in the storytelling traditions of their communities, have the ability to do for communities of the oppressed what a witness-bearing, morally committed therapist can do for an individual hurt past bearing by abuse. We gather and retell the stories of our side of history, free of the self-serving rationalizations of the looters. In the face of every act or word that would strip us of it, we tell, in all its anguish and beauty, the story of our ineradicable humanity.

NOTES

1. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 8.

2. When I say the oppressed "tolerate" oppression, I am not implying that we are responsible for it. Only that although violence is an essential component of control, the primary way that elites impose their will is through threats, distortions, lies about the nature of our relationships to each other—by creating confusion among the oppressed so that we identify to some degree with the idea that these relations are normal. When large numbers of people in a society reach a point where they no longer find conditions in any way acceptable and are willing to risk whatever is required in order to change them, the threat of physical force stops being an effective control. The overthrow of Somoza happened not because the opposition had become especially well-armed or even suddenly much better organized but because large numbers of young people reached a level of outrage that overrode the habits of resignation that years of dictatorship had instilled.

3. Rosario Morales, "Concepts of Pollution," in *Getting Home Alive* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986), 62.

THE HISTORIAN AS CURANDERA

Until lions write books, history will always
glorify the hunter.

—SOUTH AFRICAN PROVERB

One of the first things a colonizing power, a new ruling class, or a repressive regime does is attack the sense of history of those they wish to dominate by attempting to take over and control their relationships to their own past. When the invading English rounded up the harpists of Ireland and burned their harps, it was partly for their function in carrying news and expressing public opinion, for their role as opposition media, but it was also because they were repositories of collective memory. When the Mayan codices were burned, it was the Mayan sense of identity, rooted in a culture with a past, that was assaulted. The prohibitions against slaves speaking their own languages, reading and writing, and playing drums all had obvious uses in attempting to prevent organized resistance, but they were also ways of trying to control the story of who slaves thought they were.

One important way that power elites seek to disrupt the sense of historical identity of those they want to dominate is by taking over the transmission of culture to the young. Native American and Australian aboriginal children were taken from their families by force and required to abandon the language, dress, customs, and spirituality of their own people. Irish and Welsh children in English-controlled schools, and Puerto Rican, Mexican, Chinese, and many other nationalities of children in US public schools were punished and ridiculed for speaking their home languages.

Invading the historical identities of the subjugated is one part of the task of domination, accomplished through the destruction of records, oral traditions, and cultural forms and by interfering with the education of the young. The other is to create an imperial version of our lives. When a controlling elite of any kind comes to power, it requires a replacement origin myth, a story that explains the new imbalances of power as natural, inevitable, and permanent, as somehow inherent in the natures of slave and master, invaded and invader, and therefore unchangeable; that explains changes imposed on gender relations, family structure, land use, sexuality, and other important aspects of people's lives as the way it always should have been. A substitute for the memories of the colonized. Official history is designed to make sense of oppression, to say that the oppressed are oppressed because it is their nature to be oppressed. A strong sense of their own history among the dominated undermines the project of domination. It provides an alternative story, one in which oppression is the result of human behavior, of historical events and choices, and not natural law.

Official histories also fulfill a vital role for those who rule. Those who dominate must justify themselves and find ways to see their own dominance as not only legitimate but also as the only acceptable option. So the founding fathers spoke of the need to control democracy so that only those fit for rule by the experience of managing wealth would have the opportunity to hold public office; some slaveholders framed the kidnapping and enslavement of West Africans as beneficial to the enslaved, as offering them the blessings of a higher state of civilization; misogynist patriarchs speak of protecting woman from her own weak nature; and the colonized everywhere are defined as in need of improvement, which only a better management of their labor and resources can offer.

In his 1976 essay "Defensa de la palabra" Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano wrote, "What process of change can move a people that does not know who it is, nor where it came from? If it doesn't know who it is, how can it know what it deserves to be?" The role of a socially committed historian is to use history, not so much to document the past as to restore to the dehistoricized a sense of identity and possibility. Such "medicinal" histories seek to reestablish the connections between people and their histories, to reveal the mechanisms of power, the steps by which

their current condition of oppression was achieved, through a series of decisions made by real people to dispossess them, but also to reveal the multiplicity, creativity, and persistence of their own resistance.

History is the story we tell ourselves about how the past explains our present, and the ways we tell it are shaped by contemporary needs. When debates raged in 1992 about the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, what was most significant about all the voices in the controversy, the official pomp and ceremony, the outraged protests of indigenous and other colonized peoples of the Americas, and the counterattacking official responses, is that each of these positions had something vital to say about the nature of our contemporary lives and relationships, which our conflicting interpretations of the events of 1492 simply highlighted.

All historians have points of view. All of us use some process of selection by which we choose which stories we consider important and interesting. We do history from some perspective, within some particular worldview. Storytelling is not neutral. Curandera historians make this explicit, openly naming our partisanship, our intent to influence how people think.

Between 1991 and 1996 I researched and wrote *Remedios*, a medicinal version of Puerto Rican history told through the lives of women, not so much because the pasts of Puerto Rican women were inherently necessary to talk about, but because I wanted to change the way Puerto Rican women think of ourselves historically. As a result, I did not attempt to write a comprehensive general history but rather to frame historical events in ways that would contribute to decolonizing the identities and imaginations of Puerto Rican women and to creating a culture of resistance.

Remedios is testimonio, both in the sense of a life story, an autobiography of my relationship to my past, and, like the testimonios of Latin American activists—many of them survivors of prison and torture—in bearing witness to a much larger history of abuse and resistance in which many women and men participated. One of the most significant ways in which *Remedios* differs from conventional historical writing is in how

explicitly I proclaim that my interest in history lies in its medicinal uses, in the power of history to provide those healing stories that can restore the humanity of the traumatized, and not for any inherent interest in the past for its own sake. *Remedios* does not so much tell history as it interrogates it. It seeks to be provocative rather than comprehensive, to build the potency of our resistance, not just accumulate information.

In the writing I chose to make myself visible as a historian with an agenda, but also as a subject of this history and one of the traumatized seeking to recover herself. My work became less and less about creating a reconstructed historical record and more and more a use of my own relationship to history, my questions and challenges, my mapping of ignorance and contradiction, my anger and sorrow and exhilaration, to testify, through my personal responses to them, to how the official and renegade stories of the past impact Puerto Rican women. To explore, by sharing how I had done so in my own life, the ways that recaptured history could be used as a tool of recovery from a multitude of blows. In writing *Remedios*, I made myself the site of experimentation and engaged in a process of decolonizing my own relationship to history as one model of what was possible.

As I did so, I evolved a set of understandings or instructions to myself about how to do this kind of work, a kind of curandera's handbook of historical practice. The rest of this essay is that handbook.

1. TELL UNTOLD OR UNDERTOLD HISTORIES.

The first and most obvious choice is to seek out and tell those histories that have not been told or have not been told often enough. If history books looked like the population of the world, they would be full of women, poor people, workers, children, People of Color, slaves, the colonized. In the case of *Remedios*, where I had already chosen to tell Puerto Rican history through the lives of women, this meant continually seeking out and emphasizing the stories of women who were poor, indigenous, African, mestiza and mulata, women enslaved and indentured, rural women, emigrant women in the United States.

2. CENTERING WOMEN CHANGES THE LANDSCAPE.

Making truly medicinal history requires that we do more than just add women (or any other "disappeared" group of people) to the existing frameworks. We need to ask, If women are assumed to be the most important people in this story, how will that change the questions we ask? How will it change our view of what events and processes are most important? How will it change the answers to questions that have already been asked and supposedly answered?

For example, if you ask "Until what point did the indigenous Arawak people of Puerto Rico have a significant impact on the society?," until recently most Puerto Rican historians would say that the Arawaks stopped playing a major part by around 1550 because they no longer existed as a people. But what no longer existed in 1550 were organized lowland villages, caciques, war bands—in other words, those aspects of social organization that European men would consider most important and would be most likely to recognize. If we ask the same question centered on women, we would need to look at those areas of life in which women had the most influence. Evidence from other parts of the Americas shows that traditional cultures survived longest in those arenas controlled by nonelite women. If we put women at the center, it becomes clear that Arawak culture continued to have a strong influence on rural Puerto Ricans until much later, in fact into the present, particularly in the practices of agriculture and medicine, spirituality, child rearing, food preparation, and in the production of cloth, pottery, and other material goods.

Similarly, in exploring when Puerto Ricans first began to have a distinct sense of nationality, the usual evidence considered is the publication of newspapers or the formation of patriotic societies, activities dominated by white men. How did women experience nationality? If, as José Luis González asserts, the first people to see themselves as Puerto Rican were Black people, who lacked mobility and were, perforce, committed to Puerto Rico, what about the impact of non-Black women's mobility or lack of it?[1] Did women experience a commitment to Puerto Rican identity as a result of childbearing and extended family ties? Did they feel Puerto Rican earlier or later than men? If women are at the center, how does that change the meaning of social movements like the strongly

feminist Puerto Rican labor movement of the early twentieth century? Medicinal history does not just look for ways to fit in more biographies of people from underrepresented groups. It shifts the landscape in which the questions are asked and makes a different kind of sense out of existing information.

3. IDENTIFY STRATEGIC PIECES OF MISINFORMATION AND CONTRADICT THEM.

In challenging imperial histories, some kinds of misinformation have more of an impact than others. Part of the task of a curandera historian is diagnosis. We need to ask ourselves what aspects of imperial history do the most harm, which lies are at the foundation of our disempowered sense of ourselves or of other people. Some of these strategic pieces of misinformation will be the same for all projects, and I name several below. Some will be of central importance only to specific histories. In the case of Puerto Rican history, examples of some of the specific lies I decided were important to debunk were the absence or downplaying of Africa and African people in official histories, the idea that there was such a thing as "pure" Spanish culture in 1492 or at any time since, and the invisibility of Puerto Ricans' relations with people from other countries, especially the French, English, and Dutch colonies of the Caribbean. The first is about erasure; the other two deal with ideas of national or cultural purity, and also the myth of passivity, the lack of historical initiative in shaping our lives.

4. MAKE ABSENCES VISIBLE.

The next three points deal with the nature and availability of historical evidence. When you are investigating and telling the history of disenfranchised people, you can't always find the kind and amount of written material you want. But in medicinal history the goal is as much to generate questions and show inconsistencies as it is to document people's lives.

For example, tracing absences can balance a picture, even when you are unable to fill in the blanks. Lack of evidence doesn't mean you can't name and describe what is missing. Tracing the outlines of a woman-shaped hole in the record, talking about the existence of women about

whom we know only general information, can be a powerful way of correcting imperial history. I wrote one piece about the indigenous women known to have been brought to Puerto Rico from other parts of Central, South, and North America who left no trace of their real names or even what nations they came from.

> We are your Indian grandmothers from Eastern America, stolen from our homes and shipped to wherever they needed our work. From Tierra Firme to the islands. From one island to another. From this side to that, each colony raiding for its own supply. . . . They have passenger lists with the names of those who came west over the ocean to take our lands, but our names are not recorded. . . . Some of us died so far from home we couldn't even imagine the way back: Cherokee in Italy, Tupi in Portugal, Inuit in Denmark. Many of us were fed into the insatiable gold mines of el imperio alongside the people of your island, and they called us simply indias. But we were as different from one another as Kongo from Wolof, Turk from Dane. . . . We are the ancestors of whom no record has been kept. We are trace elements in your bodies, minerals coloring your eyes, residue in your fingernails. You were not named for us. You don't know the places where our bones are, but *we* are in *your* bones. Because of us, you have relatives among the many tribes. You have cousins on the reservations.

Such a piece makes clear the significance of people and events we know existed but know no details about. It marks the spot.

It is also possible to use fictitious characters to highlight an absence, as Virginia Woolf does in *A Room of One's Own* when she speaks of Shakespeare's talented fictitious sister, for whom no opportunities were open. To make visible the absence of women writers I wrote a similar piece about the invented sister of a Spanish chronicler who visited Puerto Rico in the eighteenth century.

5. ASKING QUESTIONS CAN BE AS GOOD AS ANSWERING THEM.

Another way of dealing with lost history is to ask speculative questions. "What if" is a legitimate tool of investigation, and the question can be as valuable as the answers. Proposing a radically different possible interpretation

is a way of opening up how we think about events, even when there is no way to prove anything. It is useful to ask, "What would have to be different for us to understand this story in this other way?"

The chronicles of the Spanish conquest of Puerto Rico have relatively little to say about the cacica Guanina and her liaison with the Spaniard Cristobal Sotomayor. The popularized version I grew up on goes something like this. Innocent Indian Maiden sees the most handsome man she's ever laid eyes on, far surpassing anyone in her whole culture. She falls in love with him, even though he has enslaved her community, whose members are dying like flies. She becomes his lover, and when her people plot an uprising, she runs to warn him. He doesn't take her seriously, not because he's an arrogant idiot but because he's brave, and promptly rides into an ambush and dies. Guanina is beside herself with grief and kills herself. Her brother the chief finds her dead body lying across her slain lover, the two are buried side by side, and the lilies of Spain entwine with the wildflowers of Puerto Rico upon their graves.

On the face of it this is an extremely unlikely tale. Guanina was the niece of the high cacique of Puerto Rico, in a matrilineal society in which a sister's children inherited power and wealth and there were women who ruled as cacicas in their own right. At eighteen she would have been considered a full adult and a woman of influence and prestige. Puerto Rico, called Boriken by the Arawaks, was not permanently settled by European colonists until 1508, although the torture and killing of Native people had begun with Columbus. By the time Sotomayor took control of the southwestern region of the island, where Guanina's family ruled, the Arawaks of Boriken had had eighteen years of news from Hispaniola and had a pretty good idea of what was likely to happen to them.

Mohawk writer Beth Brant points out, in an article on Pocahontas, that indigenous women sometimes sought out liaisons with European men as a way of creating ties of kinship, in the hope that such a bond would help them fend off the worst consequences of invasion. If all we do is assume, for a moment, that Guanina was not naïve, but was an intelligent woman, used to seeing herself as important, that she was thinking about what she was doing and had more at stake than a cute boyfriend, the Spanish colonial story becomes completely implausible. My fictionalized reinterpretation of Guanina's story is based on that implausibility. It proposes another possible set of motives and understandings that could

explain the known facts of her life and death and leave us with a sense of her dignity and purpose. It is speculative, and without hard evidence, but it raises important questions about how to understand the actions of smart people in intolerable conditions.

6. WHAT CONSTITUTES EVIDENCE?

Another issue to keep in mind is the biases built into historical standards of evidence. Although there is an increasing acceptance of other forms of documentation, the reliance is still heavily on the written. Which means that we accept an immense body of experience as unavailable for historical discussion. The fact that something was written down does not make it true, as any critical consumer of the media knows. It simply means that someone with sufficient authority to write things down recorded their version of events or transactions while someone else did not. It is evidence of some of what the authorities did, some of what they wanted others to think they did and some of what they thought about it. No more. Of course, even something as partial as this is a treasure trove, but when we rely on written records we need to continually ask ourselves what might be missing, what might have been recorded in order to manipulate events and in what direction, and in what ways are we allowing ourselves to assume that objectivity is in any way connected with literacy. We need to remind ourselves that much of what we want to know wasn't written about and also to think about ways to expand what we will consider as contributing to evidence. Is the oral tradition of a small town, handed down over fourteen generations, about the mass exodus of local men to the gold mines of Brazil really less reliable than what women tobacco workers charged with civil offenses deposed before a judge whose relatives owned tobacco fields? As historians of the underrepresented we need to question the invalidation of nonliterate mechanisms of memory.

7. SHOW AGENCY.

One of the big lies of imperial history is that only members of the elite act, and everyone else is acted upon. In our attempts to expose the cruelty of slavery and conquest, market-driven famine, or the ownership and subjugation of women and children by men, we sometimes portray

the oppressed as nothing more than victims and are unable to see the full range of responses that people always make to their circumstances. People who are being mistreated are *always* trying to figure out ways to end, avoid, or lessen that mistreatment. Their strategies may be shortsighted, opportunistic, or ineffective or involve the betrayal of others, but they nevertheless represent a form of resistance. For the sake of our planetary future, it's essential that we learn to develop strategies that hold out for real transformation and that take everyone's well-being into account. But in telling the history of our social relations with each other over time, it's important to recognize that resistance takes many forms. We need to continually challenge the myth of passive victimization, which leaves both the mistreated and the mistreaters and their descendants feeling ashamed and undeserving of unfettered lives. Even under the most brutal conditions, people find ways to assert their humanity. Medicinal history must show the continual exercise of choice by people who appear powerless.

8. SHOW COMPLEXITY AND EMBRACE AMBIGUITY AND CONTRADICTION.

In order to do so, we must also give up the idea that people are 100 percent heroic or villainous. In searching out a history of resistance, the temptation is to find heroic figures and either overlook their failings or feel betrayed when we find that they have some. Human beings are not all resistance or all collaboration and complicity. Popular official history tends to be simplistic and ahistorical as regards individuals, focused on exceptional personalities instead of complex social processes. If we ignore what is contradictory about our own impulses toward solidarity or betrayal in an attempt to simplify history into good and evil, we will sacrifice some of the most important lessons to be gained from studying the past.

Important as they are, we need more than just the heroic stories of militant resistance—of suffragists chained to railings, slaves burning plantation houses, armed revolts like that of John Brown. Stories of accommodation, collaboration, and outright defeat are just as important because they give us ways to understand our lives as *caused* rather than just existing. If we want to give people a sense of their own agency, of having always been actors as well as acted upon, we must be willing to tell stories

full of contradiction that show the real complexity of the causes of their current conditions.

For example, Nzinga, born in 1585, was a queen among the Mbundu of what is now Angola. She was a fierce anticolonial warrior, a militant fighter, a woman holding power in a male-dominated society, and she laid the basis for successful Angolan resistance to Portuguese colonialism all the way into the twentieth century. She was also an elite woman living off the labor of others, murdered her brother and his children, fought other African people on behalf of the Portuguese, and collaborated in the slave trade.

I tell her story in two different ways, once at the end of her life, celebrating her courage, her relentless defense of her people, and the power of her memory, especially for Black women, and once from the point of view of the woman on whose back she literally sat as she negotiated with the Portuguese governor. It is in many ways more empowering when we tell the stories of our heroic figures as contradictory characters full of weaknesses and failures of insight. It enables us to see our own choices and potentials more clearly and to understand that imperfect people can have a powerful, liberating impact on the world.

9. REVEAL HIDDEN POWER RELATIONSHIPS.

Imperial history obscures the power relations that underlie our daily lives. This is one of the ways that immense imbalances of power and resources are made to seem natural. In telling the history of any community, especially those targeted by some form of oppression, we need to expose those relationships of unequal power whether they come from outside our group or lie within it. Puerto Rican liberal feminists of the late nineteenth century, all those "firsts" in the arts and education, came primarily from a hacendado class made affluent by the slave-produced profits of the sugar industry. Many of the leaders of the 1868 Lares uprising against Spain were coffee planters angered by their growing dependence on newly arrived merchants and the credit they offered but perfectly willing to employ coffee workers at starvation wages.

Another way to expose unequal power is to reveal hidden economic relationships. One way I did this was by following the products of Puerto

Rican women's labor to their destinations and tracing the objects of their daily use to their sources. This shows both the degree of control exerted on our lives by the profit seeking of the wealthy and uncovers relationships we have with working people in other parts of the world. In the 1600s, ginger grown by Puerto Rican women and men was sold to English smugglers from Jamaica and ended up spicing the daily gingerbread of London's working poor. One of the main items imported in exchange was used clothing made in the mills of England and the Low Countries. This reveals a different relationship between Puerto Ricans and English people than the "great civilization–insignificant primitive colony" story told in the 1923 *Encyclopedia Britannica* we had in my home, which described Puerto Rico merely as a small island with no natural resources. Telling Puerto Rican community college students that the stagehands for Shakespeare's productions probably ate Puerto Rican food on their lunch breaks changes their relationship to that body of "high culture."

Similarly Puerto Rican women and children picked and processed coffee that was considered the best in the world at the turn of the century. Yauco coffee was served in the wealthiest homes of New York, Paris, and Vienna. Mrs. J. P. Morgan bought her personal supply from Yauco, and all those famous European philosophers, poets, and painters drank it at their salons. Juxtaposing photographs of coffee workers who earned pennies for their labor with the silver coffeepots and reclining gentry who consumed the coffee restores Puerto Rican women's labor to its place in an international web of trade and profit.

I wrote one piece in which I described the lunch preparations of a rural Puerto Rican neighbor and showed how the food she set on the table was a map of the world, revealing her connections to people in Malaysia, Ethiopia, Portugal, and many other places. I describe the vegetables grown and canned in the Imperial and Salinas valleys of California by Mexican and Filipina women and promoted as the "modern" replacement for fresh produce to Puerto Rican housewives of the late 1940s and 1950s. I read this piece as part of a talk I gave at a small college in Michigan, including a section about *bacalao,* the dry salt cod that is a staple protein of Puerto Rican cuisine.

> The bacalao is the fin-tip of a vast movement in which the shadows of small fishing boats skim across the Grand Banks of Nova Scotia hauling

cod from immense schools of feeding fish, salt it down in their holds and return with rumors of great lands to fourteenth century Basque fishing villages and Portuguese port towns. Return to Iceland, to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and to build up the great shipping fortunes of Massachusetts. The flaking yellow flesh makes her part of a wide Atlantic net of people who live from the cod: catch the cod, salt the cod, pack and ship the cod, sell the cod, import and export the cod, stretch a piece of it into food for a family for a week.

After the talk, a man came up to me, deeply moved, to tell me that he had grown up in a Nova Scotia fishing village and his family had packed cod. I thanked him and told him we had eaten it for breakfast. "So did we!" he exclaimed. "We ate it with green bananas," I told him. "We ate it with potatoes," he replied, and we embraced. The last place he had expected to hear about his own life was in a talk on Puerto Rican women's history. Revealing this kind of connection increases our recognition of our common interests and uncovers the importance of our daily work, the way we and the people we know spend our days, in the international scheme of things.

10. PERSONALIZE.

The majority of historical figures who are known by name are members of elite groups, while everyone else tends to be known en masse. However, there are quite a few places where the names of individual people who are poor, female, dark, and so on can be found in written records. Using the actual names of real individuals and any known details of their lives to dramatize and personalize the social condition of a group makes those conditions far more real to us. When the disenfranchised appear only in crowd scenes, it reinforces a sense of their relative unimportance.

In writing about the lives of recently freed slave women in Puerto Rico, forced to contract themselves as laborers for two years after abolition, I used names of specific women found in a footnote in a book on slavery in San Juan. Many freed slaves fulfilled the requirement by finding and contracting themselves to relatives. These footnotes contained the details of which family members they sought out and what work they did. I wrote:

> The roots of the family tree go deeper than the cruel reach of slavery. Juana Gutierrez seeks out her granddaughters Josefa (28) and Matilde (32), the first liberated from the establishment of Sucesión Turull, the second from the grip of Teresa Amadeo. Juana Geigel, from Carolina, ex-slave of Teodoro Chevremont, presents herself in San Juan, in order to work for her father, Felix Angulo, "to provide him with the necessities of life." . . . Eustaquia Amigó works as a candy maker for her mother María Luisa Amigó. Her contract says she does not wish to be paid. Maria Narcisa, freed from Ysidro Cora, Yrene, freed from Rafael Cabrera, and Ventura, freed from Micaela Benisbeitía fly like swift and hungry birds to their mothers, and work for them, provide for them, take up their loads.

This has an entirely different impact than writing "Many freedwomen sought out their relatives and contracted to work for them."

The best documented Arawak women are cacicas, members of the indigenous ruling class known as *nitainos*. Most of the stories about Arawak women focus on cacicas like Guanina, Loiza, or Anacaona. But we know that the majority of Arawak women belonged to the *naboria* laborer class. I found a list of indigenous women both from Boriken and from the smaller islands of the Eastern Caribbean who were being branded as slaves on one particular day in 1515. Many were given two names in the record, one Spanish and one Arawak or Carib, and many others were simply renamed Maria, Juana, or Catalina. When we use names that were at least imposed on real women, and the few facts recorded about them, their anonymity in the records of their abusers is at least made visible and the realities of their lives during the conquest become more tangible.

From "1515: Naborías"

They were not cacicas.
They were not heirs to yuca fields.
There were no concessions made to their status.
They were not "queens."
Their names are recorded in the lists of work gangs
sent to the mines, the conucos, the kitchens, the laundries
of the Spanish invaders.
Macaney, field hand.
Francisquilla, cook.

Ana, baker.
Catalina, pig woman.
They were the working women of Boriken.
They were called out of their names.
Casually recorded under the names of Catholic saints,
or the queens of the myriad kingdoms of Spain, renamed
after little sisters or mothers left behind in Estremadura,
Navarra, Castilla, Sevilla, León
or a favorite prostitute from a port town,
or a beauty out of some ballad of the old land.
They were not born Catalina, Ana, Francisquilla. . . .
The account books of the governor say *herrose*—
branded on this day—was Elvira Arumaita
from the island of Guadalupe
with a son they called Juanico.
herrose, a Carib called Beatriz, and her son, Juanico.
herrose a Carib, Juana Cabarotaxa, from the island of Santa Cruz, and
herrose, a little girl called Anita, Carib,
from the aforementioned island
which we now call Guadalupe, and *herrose,*
also from Guadalupe, Magdalena Guavrama
Carib, and her child.
They were already here, enslaved, escaped,
and to their great misfortune, recaptured
and branded this day by Captain Juan Ponce de León,
Ana Taguas, Violante Ateyba
Leonor Yayguana written down as belonging
to the rebel cacique Abey,
and Isabel Guayuca with her son, once again Juanico,
once owing loyalty to the collaborator Cayey.
They were women under two masters,
the crumbling authority of the caciques
and the new and violent usage of the señores.

In cases where we really don't have names, documented elements in the lives of a social group can still be personalized by writing a narrative that conveys the details of such a life. I used figures on average wages of

women in coffee, sugar, and garment work in the early twentieth century along with a list of the prices of housing and essential foods to write an internal monologue about the kinds of choices a single mother of several children has to make during the dead season of the sugar cane industry, when there is little work and a lot of illness. Details like the difference between feeding your children unbroken rice, broken rice, or cornmeal make the actual struggles of such women visible and give them an emotional impact that mere lists of wages paid cannot.

11. SHOW CONNECTION AND CONTEXT.

One element of imperial history is that events tend to be seen as caused by extraordinary personalities acting on one another without showing us the social roots and contexts of those actions. For example, many of the great discoveries and inventions we are taught about in elementary and high school were being pursued by many people at once, but the individual who received the patent is described as a lone explorer rather than part of a group effort. Rosa Parks didn't "get tired" one day and start the Montgomery bus boycott. She was a trained organizer, and her role, as well as the time and place of the boycott, was the result of careful planning by a group of civil rights activists. Just as medicinal history must restore individuality to anonymous masses of people, it must also restore social context to individuals singled out as the actors of history.

12. RESTORE GLOBAL MEANING.

One element of imperial history that is particularly strong in the United States is a sense that the rest of the world is irrelevant. Few USers are knowledgeable about the geography, politics, culture, and history of other countries. In 1968, when I was fourteen, I spent a summer in Cuba. One of the most striking things for me was opening the paper each day to find regular ongoing coverage of dozens of countries I had only heard of before as occasional "hot spots" or tourist destinations. Imperial history tends to talk about the world outside of imperial headquarters episodically, as if it existed only when the attention of the empire was upon it.

The way I was taught ancient history in school left me with an impression of a darkened world in which nothing happened until the lights

of civilization were turned on, first in Mesopotamia, then in Ancient Greece, then Rome, and spreading northwest into Europe. Only then, as European expansion took off, did the Americas, Asia, and Africa appear. It was at home, in the bedtime stories our father told us, that I learned of Chinese merchants trading with East Africa in the twelfth century, the great university of Timbuktu, and the vast expanse and intellectual achievements of the Islamic world.

Another task of medicinal history is to show that all parts of the world coexist and always have. (Contrary to popular expressions like "Stone Age people" or "just entering the twentieth century," all people now alive are living at the same time, whatever our technologies or forms of social organization.) We also need to show that complexity and change exist and always have existed in all parts of the world.

One of my old projects was a curriculum that starts in Shakespeare's England and connects his life and writings to events and people in the rest of the world. How many of us are ever asked to think about what was happening in China, Peru, and Mali while *Hamlet* was being written? What realities of North African history and politics hovered behind the scenes of *Othello*?

In *Remedios,* I included an ancient and a medieval section in which I showed the diversity and vitality of people's lives in the three regions from which Puerto Ricans originate: West Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Caribbean. I wanted to create a sense of balance between the regions long before 1492.

As a discipline, history is taught by regions and time periods, in ways that often make it difficult to focus on linkages. Medicinal history can restore a sense of the global to fragmented colonial histories. The arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean is closely connected with the expulsions of Jews and Moslems from Spain, linking the history of San Juan with that of Constantinople and Marrakech. The upheavals that the slave trade brought to West Africa and the conflicts between and within African nations have a direct bearing on who showed up in the slave markets of the island. The fact that General Nelson Miles, who led the US invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, was also the most prominent military commander of the wars against the Plains Indians is not just biographical information about Miles's career. It connects the stories of peoples affected by US expansion from Puerto Rico to the Dakotas, from Idaho and Arizona to

Hawaii and the Philippines. Reestablishing a sense of the connectedness of world events to one another is a critical piece of the work of the activist historian.

13. PROVIDE ACCESS AND DIGESTIBILITY.

If the purpose of medicinal history is to transform the way we see ourselves historically, to change our sense of what's possible, then making history available to those who need it most is not a separate process from researching and interpreting it. The task of the curandera historian includes delivery.

To do exciting, empowering research and leave it in academic journals and university libraries is like manufacturing unaffordable medicines for deadly diseases. We need to take responsibility for sharing our work in ways that people can assimilate, not in the private languages and forms of scholars. This is the difference between curanderas and pharmaceutical companies. Pharmaceutical companies notoriously go into communities of indigenous people and other People of Color worldwide, steal and patent traditional science, technology, and even the plants themselves, and produce medicines that are completely out of reach of the people who invented them. We need to be careful, in doing historical research about disenfranchised communities, to see that the active ingredients get back to the people whose ancestors generated our work.

A good medicine also includes a delivery system, something that gets it to the parts of your body that need it. Those who are hungriest for what we dig up don't read scholarly journals and shouldn't have to. As historians, we need to either be artists and community educators or we need to find people who are and figure out how to collaborate with them.

We can work with community groups to create original public history projects that involve people in their creation. We can see to it that our work gets into at least local popular culture through theater, murals, historical novels, posters, films, children's books, radio documentaries, websites, or a hundred other art forms. We can work with elementary and high school teachers to create curricula. Medicinal history is a form of healing. Its purpose is conscious and overt: to improve the social health of all people. So it has to work like a network of community clinics, not a luxury resort spa.

15. SHOW YOURSELF IN YOUR WORK.

One of the pretenses of history is that being rigorous about research is the same as being objective. Since history is a collection of stories about people in conflict, and all our families were involved, it seems a ridiculous claim. Objectivity isn't all it's cracked up to be anyway. Being objective is often understood to mean not taking sides, but failing to take sides when someone is being hurt is immoral. In writing about the past, we are choosing to bear witness to the impact of that past on the people around us. We don't stand apart from history. We are in the midst of it right this minute, and the stances we take matter. A committed moral stance does not mean that we cannot be rigorous. While the agenda of the activist historian is to restore a sense of historical and present worth to those from whom it's been robbed (and to restore proportion to those whose importance has been artificially inflated), our ability to see worth in the contradictory and ambiguous means we welcome the full picture. We don't, in the narrow sense, have an axe to grind.

Part of what oppression tries to teach us is that as intellectuals we need not involve ourselves, and that it is undignified and undisciplined to do so. Certainly to talk and write openly about our personal, emotional, as well as intellectual stakes in our work is frowned on and lets us in for ridicule and disrespect. Nevertheless it's important for people's historians not to hide ourselves. Part of what keeps our work honest is acknowledging why we care about it and who we are in relation to it. We often write the books we most need to read and do research that in some way touches on core issues in our own lives. Revealing this is a way of shedding the cloak of apartness and sharing our humanity.

16. CROSS BORDERS.

At a lecture I gave on my historical research, someone asked how I found all these myriad connections between seemingly unrelated topics. I realized, as I answered her, that the key decision had been to allow myself to be widely curious, across all boundaries of discipline, geography, and time. Academic training and the workings of the higher education marketplace exert powerful pressure on us to narrow our interests and not cross into unfamiliar territory. A commitment to the study of connections

requires us to continually do so. The categories of discipline, geography, and historical period are themselves constructed in obedience to certain priorities that don't necessarily serve the projects of medicinal history. Borders are generally established in order to exercise control, and when we center our attention on the historical empowerment of the disempowered, we inevitably swim rivers, lift barbed wire, and violate No Trespassing signs.

NOTE

1. José Luis González, *Pais de cuatro pisos* (San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 1980).

NIGHT FLYING

Power, Memory, and Magic

One of the challenges of effective activism is learning to simultaneously hold a clear picture of radical transformation and take advantage of the smaller opportunities that present themselves, without being distracted or seduced into thinking them adequate. Reforms make life easier but don't resolve the fundamental injustices. It is tempting, easy, and to some degree reasonable to seek individual remedies for oppression or become committed to fighting for a greater number of individual remedies to become available. Finding ways to ease the burdens of oppression is a perfectly acceptable tactic, if the real goal of eliminating it completely is kept in sight. A few years ago Andrea Smith, speaking at the national membership meeting of Jewish Voice for Peace, told a story about organizers against domestic violence who, asked about their goals, spoke of better shelters, not an end to the violence that makes them necessary.

But to keep in mind the necessity of eliminating a whole system of injustices, we need to keep the pain, the trauma, the suffering, and outrage in mind too, and without adequate political support, it is extremely difficult to hold the reality of oppression in our awareness.

Feminist women in heterosexual relationships, which I have been in the past, generally have a clear understanding of the scope and violence of patriarchy, but in daily life it's much easier to keep our attention on "fixing" our male partner or negotiating small shifts of power around

household chores or emotional work than it is to confront the reality that changing our partner's habits will not have any effect on our real position in the world. At best, it will make that position a little easier to tolerate and allow us to keep some reserves of energy intact. Patriarchy can't be solved by an improvement in the communications skills or household habits of the men in our lives.

Only when there is adequate political support can we create a context in which we are able to hold both the reality of oppression and a sense of our own power to oppose it. When that support doesn't exist, we avoid whatever events in our own lives, in the lives of others, or in our history would lead us to intolerable truths.

In her book *Witchcraze*, Ann Barstow documents the inability of historians of the witch persecutions to name, in their analyses, the central importance of gender. For Barstow, this is obvious in the demographics of the victims, in the extremity of violence being inflicted by men upon women, and in the overtly sexual nature of that violence. But even among feminist historians, very little attention has been paid to the witch trials. There have been cultural responses to the history of the persecutions, including a reclaiming or reconstruction of various versions of European paganism, attempts to reclaim the intellectual heritage of women herbalists, midwives, and healers and redeem the title of witch, and some attempts to express grief and anger over the invisibility of these events by dramatizing them. However, there has been remarkably little real research done on what were, after all, crushing events for women in Europe and some European colonies, or how the persecution of what were remnants of the indigenous religions of Europe was incorporated into European invasions of Africa, the Americas, and Asia as a weapon of cultural genocide.

A thorough examination of the witchcraft and heresy persecutions would force us to face the depth and intensity of misogyny and sexual violence which are bedrock in European and European-based societies. Violent upsurges of persecution like this one always have multiple causes, but what is most frightening is that they reveal the instability, the precariousness of our compromises and reforms. It is difficult to study such events honestly. They provoke shame, horror, denial, and a whole range of strategies to make the intolerable bearable by minimizing either the extent of the trauma or the ways in which its roots remain intact once the

eruption has subsided. Lacking a strong political movement by the traumatized to force its examination, traumatic history must be contained and sanitized, or it will quickly become too controversial and the most honest appraisals of its impact will be silenced.

Whether it is the transatlantic enslavement of West African peoples and the horrors of their centuries-long captivity; the ruthless genocidal warfare against indigenous peoples in the Americas; the systematic extermination of Jews, Roma, homosexuals, the disabled and other groups by the Nazis; the incineration and irradiation of the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; or the arrest, sexual torture, and execution of European women accused of heresy and witchcraft, the challenges are in many ways the same.

Which events we will be unable to bear examining, and which aspects of these events we will be willing to look at closely will depend on the degree of political pressure being exerted by the traumatized, but also on how closely we identify with the victims or perpetrators, the current social standing of the victim group, and what continuing stakes are involved in protecting the perpetrators from accountability. For example, the great extent to which the prosperity of the Swiss economy is based on riches accumulated through collaboration with Nazi Germany and the appropriation of Jewish bank accounts gives Swiss bankers and other members of the Swiss elite a strong stake in denying many portions of documented Holocaust history. Considerable pressure had to be brought to bear on the profit-making abilities of the Swiss banks, pressure generated by Jews who were themselves wealthy and influential within the world of international banking, before there was any acknowledgment that Swiss bankers and lawyers had stolen hundreds of millions of dollars from Jewish depositors. The origins of Swiss affluence have been normalized, and business as usual depends on that normalization.

Violence against women, contempt for women's intellectual lives, the devaluing of women's work, and fear of both our sexuality and our spirituality are so historically pervasive that they have been, to a large degree, normalized. It is easier to study the political, religious, and juridical details of the witch persecutions than to examine their intact roots in our society, or their relationship to the current war on women's self-determination, which has now led to women being imprisoned for miscarrying.

What would it mean to the study of early modern European history if the witch persecutions were taught as one of the major power shifts of that precarious time? What would it mean to teach the witch trials with as much attention, inadequate as it is, as is given to the Holocaust or the African slave trade? Why is it that the witch trials tend to be seen as archaic, without contemporary relevance?

The height of the witch hunts, from the mid-1500s to the 1700s, coincided with European expansion into Africa, the Americas, and Asia, and with profound economic changes within European society. Among these was the increased privatization of the natural world into property for the wealthy. Vandana Shiva talks about the current seizure and patenting by multinational corporations of traditional biological resources and knowledge as the "enclosure of the biological and intellectual commons." The systematic persecutions of European peasant women may have been an earlier stage of the same process, for the herbalists, midwives, and practitioners of folk religions had a relationship with the natural world that would have interfered with the growing monopolization of resources both inside and outside Europe, by class-privileged European men. It was a relationship of reciprocity, of respect, of participation. That relationship had to be broken and the women who held and transmitted the common lore systematically demonized, tormented, and violently put to death for several hundred years, in order to destroy their authority.

Among other things, the witch persecutions established elite male monopolies of knowledge, especially medical and spiritual knowledge. They also helped to shape policies toward the spiritual and scientific expertise of new colonial subjects in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Definitions of witchcraft expanded to embrace whole cultures, so that the Inquisitors in Cartagena de Indias in Colombia asked to be excused from prosecuting various kinds of common sorcery because, they said, they would have to arrest nearly the entire population. We need to understand more about the politics of witch hunting and its relationship to other forms of state terror, to the shaping of colonial policy, and to the structures of patriarchal power. It is as important to understand what allowed the persecutions to die away as to know what forces brought them on.

We also need to understand more about the legacy of that trauma and its continuing coercive effects on contemporary women. In a chilling echo of the centuries-long blood libel against Jews, fundamentalists in the

US South have accused pro-choice activists, especially lesbians, of using aborted fetuses in witchcraft rituals. In the 1990s a progressive woman labor leader in Sweden was accused of bewitching her opponents. In contemporary US and European society, accusations of witchery do not carry enough weight to bring on mass persecutions. But there is a relationship between historical accusations of baby sacrifice and the prosecution on charges of murder, of pregnant women who miscarry or act in any way that could possibly endanger a fetus. It's an attempt to monopolize and wholly own human reproduction.

And although modern efforts to control women take other forms, the imagery and folklore of the witch hunts is strongly present in our culture, and the trauma of a prolonged wave of persecutions that left whole villages without a single living woman remains unhealed. Popular culture continually reinforces the image of the dangerous old woman dressed in dark peasant clothing and a medieval peaked hat who wants to kidnap, torment, and eat children, while the few "good witches" are invariably young, beautiful, and richly dressed. We are taught to fear women elders, and "witch" is still an epithet of contempt for a strong-minded assertive woman. These cultural images may not in themselves represent a threat, but they are the residue of a time in which women were systematically tortured and put to death in large numbers, and they form part of the subsoil of the current war on women's human rights.

The unresolved trauma of the witch persecutions has been buried deep under myths of enlightenment and celebrations of conquest, rationalized as a scientific crusade against superstition or, at worst, shrugged off as medieval excess. There are no monuments, official apologies, days of collective mourning. We have not had the opportunity to reconstruct the story. We have not had the collective will to pull back the veil.

One of the common accusations against witches was night flying: the ability to change shape or endow a household object, a pot or a broom, with magical powers and soar above the landscape of daily life, with eyes that penetrate the darkness and see what we are not supposed to see. From these forbidden heights one can clearly make out the lines of extinct roads and old river beds, the patterns imposed by private landholdings, the relationships between water and growth, the proximity or distances between people. Those who can see in the dark can uncover

secrets: hidden comings and goings, deals and escapes, the undercover movements of troops, layers of life normally conducted out of sight.

Night flying requires a willingness to leave familiar ground and see what is meant to be hidden, a willingness to be transformed. If we are to know and understand the landscape of our history, we must be willing to do this—not only to look upon the horrific, the night-shadowed, and bear witness to it, but to see its place in the whole, to see that the road to the square where a dozen women and girls are burning to death is the ordinary market road, winding between the houses of people whose faces we mostly know, and that the wood that stokes the flames was neatly stacked behind their houses all along.

WHAT RACE ISN'T

Teaching about Racism

The biggest challenge in teaching about racism is to have double vision: on the one hand, to continually point out that the seemingly real, obvious, and biological foundations of racial categories are completely fabricated, constantly shifting, and in spite of their widespread acceptance, not obvious at all; on the other, to explicitly map, over and over again, the devastating injuries brought about by racism and expose the ways that ideas of race are used to justify gross economic and social inequities.

It's a tightrope walk, requiring dexterity in handling contradiction. To expose the notion of biological race as fraudulent, to look at the actual genetics of human diversity and see that there is no such thing as race, no human subspecies, without allowing any quarter to the liberal pretensions of colorblindness, to the literal whitewashing of real differences in culture, experience, power, resources. To demolish the idea of fundamental biological difference and refuse to let anyone get away with "We're all human beings" meaning "We're all like me" or use the true statement that all lives are important to undermine and dismiss the specific power of saying, in the face of systematic and deadly racist violence, that Black Lives Matter.

To bear witness to all of the bloody history of racism, to expose its manipulations and brutalities, the wicked roots of its ideologies and their ruthless implementation, and to make ample space for righteous rage,

without allowing a speck of essentialism to creep into the anger of Students of Color, conceding no space at all to ideas of "blood" determining our moral and political stances.

It is extremely useful to teach students about the flexibility of racist ideology, how adaptable it is to the needs of the elite, to see how it serves those who wield it. What does it mean that in the early twentieth century an attorney in the Minnesota Iron Range tried to classify Finns as "Mongolian" to exclude radical miners, many of them Finnish, from citizenship, but failed, because the broader elite powers didn't want to raise questions about the whiteness of any Europeans? Or that in 1923 the US Supreme Court ruled, in spite of the expert "race science" testimony of anthropologists, that a high-caste Hindu man might be Aryan but was not white because the "common understanding" of white excluded him? What does it mean that in mid-nineteenth-century debates in California Mexicans were considered white and Chinese people weren't, not because of their features but because of their relative positions in the economy of the time and place? And see how 150 years has reversed that classification: Mexican Americans are most definitely no longer seen as white, while Asian Americans, economically exploited as the working-class immigrant population continues to be, are considered the People of Color closest to "almost white." This has everything to do with the economic rise of Japan and China and the industrialization of parts of the Pacific Rim, not any increased tolerance or enlightenment among European Americans. The shifting ground of race serves the shifting interests of class.

It's in that space of critical curiosity and historical context, in the tension held between layers of truth, that insight emerges. Some of those moments of insight in my own life came from being abruptly shifted across categories in the eyes of others. In 1967 my family moved from rural Puerto Rico to Chicago. On the island my light brown hair was called *rubia*, or blonde, and although I was a Caribbean girl with indigenous and African ancestors and a colonial subject, my middle-class access in a community of farm laborers, my US Jewish father, and my light skin color made me a blanquita.

In Chicago, in the private university high school my father's faculty status entitled us to, my brother and I became *spics* overnight. My skin color got lighter in the long sunless winters, and my English was accent-free, something that people still marvel over in congratulatory voices.

But as a Puerto Rican girl in a big US city, I acquired social color. I was racially recategorized by getting on a plane.

Some of us are dark enough and Spanish-speaking enough to bear the brunt of immediate and constant recognition and unambiguous classification as a target. Others, like me, become the tokens, exotic but conditionally acceptable. We are the ones who are told we don't look Puerto Rican, don't sound Puerto Rican, the ones who are always being invited to collude in despising our own kinfolk, the ones people confide their racism to as between friends.

Redefined by migration as a young Woman of Color, and fortunate enough to find communities of activism where I could give voice to the complexity of my social identities, the loosely knit web of US feminist Women of Color became my home and the root place of my political coming of age. But "Woman of Color" is essentially a political term, not a racial one. It is a name that is not claimed by every female with dark skin and ancestors from outside of Europe. It's a name defined by collective opposition to racism, a unity created by a politicized shared experience. It brings together peoples who have been at war with one another for centuries. It brings together people whose features, colors, languages, and customs have very little in common but who, confronted with US racism, were subjected to similar abuses.

Just as "white" was invented to cover all those invited to partake of the colonial pie, some sooner, some later, it was defined always against someone else's not-whiteness. In 1744, when sailors pressed into the service of England joined with indentured servants, slaves, relocated indigenous people, and others to riot against the elites of New York City and burn their mansions, English sailors spoke of going out to attack white people as if it were obvious that this category did not include them. Many Europeans had already become white in relationship to imperialism. Others came to this country as racialized minorities in Europe: Irish, Eastern European Jewish, Roma, Slavs, and Sicilians, despised by the English, French, and Germans whose elites were the dominant imperialist powers. They became white in relation to specific groups of people who were not.

One of the challenges I offer European American students is to figure out in relation to whom their family took on this identity. For Scandinavians in Minnesota, it was most likely the Ojibwe; for the Irish and the

Ashkenazi Jews of eastern cities it was African Americans; for settlers in the Southwest it was indigenous and mestizx peoples from both sides of the new border who credentialed their whiteness; in California most likely a mixture of people from many indigenous nations, and Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinx migrants. For all their weight in our lives, the racial categories that define how injustice will be measured out are extremely circumstantial.

If we can teach the history of racism in the United States as a history of the shifting needs of empire and class, as a history of both impositions and choices, alliances and betrayals, a history with roots far outside and long before the first colonial encounters, if we can hold the tension between disbelief in race and belief in what racism does to us, we will enable more and more young people to remake old and seemingly immutable decisions about where their interests lie and with whom.

RAÍCISM

Rootedness as Spiritual and Political Practice

Racism ignores the actual lives of real people and herds us into categories where the specific truth of who we are is hidden under immense lies about whole populations. Racism divides and generalizes. Raícism, or rootedness, is about testifying to our specific, complex, historical identities in relation to one another. It's about examining exactly who our ancestors have been, with each other and with other people. To investigate the details of our family, local and ethnic histories is to do an accounting of the debts and assets we have inherited. It is an act of spiritual and political integrity to own and acknowledge the precise nature of this inheritance.

I grew up knowing only that my mother had been raised working class in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. It was not until I went to the small Puerto Rican town of Toa Alta and examined the parish registers that I discovered five generations of slaveholding ancestors among the local landed gentry of northeastern Puerto Rico. I was heartbroken and shamed, but I also felt freed. Here was the thing I had not wanted to find in my family tree. If I could figure out how to face it and consciously carry it, how to transform shame and denial into wholeness, it would give me insights about how to work with other people trapped in the numbness and guilt of privilege.

To be clear, I also count among my ancestors people of Taino and Carib, West and North African ancestry who lived as slaves and freed persons through centuries of exploitation and poverty. For me, they are easy to claim with pride. Their resilience and rage, the love they cultivated in small spaces, their arts of survival, are the core of my own capacity to live.

But learning and digesting the harder heritage of oppressors is just as critical to our survival. The more we understand about what moves people to shed privilege, to become race, class, and gender "traitors," the better our chances of shifting the balance of the world toward justice. Perceiving and naming the way that others, consciously or unawarely, wield privilege in the world, is an important skill to hone, but when we begin by taking out our own trash, we learn it from the inside and hopefully acquire some humility and compassion along the way.

The need to account for and dismantle our privileges is easily abused. The culture of calling out other activists in order to pass judgment upon them, shame them, and demand that they instantly strip themselves of social attitudes acquired over centuries is a bitter reminder of how easily oppressor mentality can creep into what are meant to be liberatory practices. Shaming, shunning, and punishing are not tools of liberation. What calling out culture misses is the truth that shedding privilege, while it can be painful, is liberating and ultimately joyful to those doing the shedding. We need to keep ourselves and each other accountable to our biggest visions of liberation, not as self-righteous prosecutors, which is in itself oppressive, but as mutual healers creating a culture of restorative justice for all.

What we need is a collective practice in which investigating and shedding privilege is seen as reclaiming connection, mending relationships broken by the system, and is framed as gain, not loss. Amílcar Cabral, leader of Guinea-Bissau's war of independence from Portuguese colonial rule, called it "class suicide," meaning to die to one's class position by irrevocably aligning oneself with the interests of the oppressed. Cuban revolutionary José Martí put it more positively and poetically in the poem that became the popular song "Guantanamera": "I want to throw in my lot with the poor of the earth. The little mountain stream pleases me more than the sea."

Any thorough and honest research into any family tree will uncover both oppressors and oppressed, people whose suffering accumulated as

wealth and power in the hands of others, even on a small scale, and people who lived from that accumulation of pain. Almost all of us are privileged along at least one axis of power, even if we are horrifically oppressed along others. As radicals, we gravitate toward the family stories of the oppressed and of the resistant, but there is an immense reserve of untapped power in seeking out our own inheritances of oppressor stories and learning from them, not because we are called out but because we are called.

Ultimately what we inherit are relationships and our beliefs about them. We can't alter the actions of our ancestors, but we can decide what to do with the social relations they left us. We can make different choices about our priorities. When our ancestors chose to cut themselves off from the suffering of others in order to gain material or social advantages, they believed it was their best shot. Without a vision of a society that could provide for all, they narrowed their interests and provided for themselves. They left us relationships of unconcern. But in today's world the consequences of selfishness and greed have been fully globalized and are catastrophic. The shedding of privilege is a precondition for human survival, and we all better get damned good at it really fast. Knowing, honestly examining, and taking full responsibility for what our ancestors left us is both a spiritual and a political practice of integrity and authenticity, empowering and radical and strategically essential.

It's a work that bestows a sense of proportion and helps us understand the choices humans make—and understanding and influencing the choices humans make is what the work of radicals is all about. Guilt and denial and the urgently defensive pull to avoid blame waste immense amounts of energy and are profoundly immobilizing. Giving them up can be a great relief. Deciding that we are in fact accountable frees us to act. Acknowledging our ancestors' participation in the oppression of others (and this is ultimately true of everyone), and deciding to balance the accounts on their behalf and our own, leads to less shame and more integrity, less self-righteousness and more righteousness, more humility and compassion and sense of proportion.

At the same time, uncovering the credit side of the accounts, not the suffering and opportunism but the solidarity, persistence, love, hard work, creativity, and soul of our forebears is also an obligation we owe them. We are the ones responsible for carrying that forward into our own time, calling on our kin to do likewise, building upon that foundation

and passing it on, enriched, to new generations. For people committed to liberation, to claim our descent from the perpetrators is a renewal of faith in human beings. If slavers, invaders, committers of genocide, and inquisitors can beget abolitionists, resistance fighters, healers, and community builders, then anyone can transform an inheritance of privilege or victimization into something more fertile than either.

One of the rewards of discovering exactly who our people have been, how, and with whom, is the possibility of unimagined kinship. My Jewish ancestors were settled in Ukraine in the early 1800s as a buffer against Turkish invasion, alongside German Mennonites, German Bohemians (Boehmisch), and other minorities with strong traditions of farming, in part to teach the formerly landless Jews how to work the land. At a talk in Wichita, Kansas, I was able to thank their descendants and claim a different relationship between us, an Eastern European Jew among German Christians, than that of the Holocaust.

Mapping the specificity of our ethnicity also reveals hidden relationships. European Americans in this country need to find out against whom their whiteness has been structured, both historically and in the present. The answers will be very different for the descendants of a Scot from Iowa, an Irishwoman from Alabama, a New York Pole, a Louisiana French-Spanish Creole, a Texan with roots in seventeenth-century England and nineteenth-century Austria, and a Rumanian Jew who settled in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. Knowing the specificity is not a substitute for understanding and accounting for participation in the megastructures of white supremacy, but it reveals something about how white people entered into that devil's deal and allows for a more personal path toward reversing it.

I carry the names of the people my ancestors held in slavery in a place of honor beside my own enslaved and colonized kin. Their stories are part of my identity, part of the web of tainted human relations that all of us live within. I am descended from the Taino people of Boriken and Hayti and the early Spanish colonizers of the Caribbean, active and passive participants in attempted genocide. I have kin among both enslaved and slaveholding Puerto Ricans. I carry the knowledge that the upward mobility of my Jewish ancestors meant leaving people behind, accepting a larger share, buying, at least somewhat, into the idea that class privilege is earned. That along with the income my father's academic career generated, I inherit places in the

social landscape I don't see because privilege has blocked my view.[1] And just as I see all kinds of terrain invisible to people with privileges I lack, I know there are people all around me who can bring those blank spots on the map into focus for me.

For a while I worked as a radical genealogist, helping my clients identify their specific legacies, including their family's social debts. I led workshops in which people could help each other examine a key family story and look for the missing people, the unspoken contracts, the outright lies, at whose expense their people had survived, in whose bank accounts their labor had been deposited. Then we would craft actions they could take, first steps toward repair: a water trust by the descendent of a dam builder who brought famine to a specific southwestern people. A new plaque on a statue to ancestors newly discovered to have reenacted upon Native American neighbors the slaughter they'd survived in Scotland. A new interpretation in which stories of abandonment and assimilation are revealed as heroic resistance in dire times, and the resisters honored.

Systemic oppression operates independently of any one life story, but systems are made of people and the stories we use to explain the world. Those stories, those accumulations of traumatized memory, inaccurate information, shame, and fear, and all the contradictory things—courageous, reprehensible, or morally ambiguous—that our people did to survive are the glue holding the systemic together. The practice of unsticking them, of facing and deciphering how history has shaped us, can be a deeply empowering path toward integrity and make us more capable of turning our complicated inheritances toward the common good.

NOTE

1. The original version of this essay used the phrase "blind spot" to describe this phenomenon. I posted a question about the metaphorical use of that term in an online group for disabled people to ask each other questions. While there was no consensus, enough people considered it derogatory when used metaphorically, that I changed the language. This is an example of changing my inherited relationships with a group of people whose experience I don't share.

THE POLITICS OF CHILDHOOD

Childhood is the one political condition, the one disenfranchised group through which all people pass. The one constituency of the oppressed in which all surviving members eventually stop being members and have the option of becoming administrators of the same conditions for new members.

All adults share the privileges of adulthood and the memories of systematic subjugation, disempowerment, and control. Even those who were not treated with cruelty as children, who had loving parents with good parenting skills, still experienced arbitrary decisions, control over our bodily functions, involuntary confinement, and whether at home, at school or in other settings, disrespect, patronization, punishment, and ridicule.

The oppression of children is the wheel that keeps all other oppressions turning. Without it, misery would have to be imposed afresh on each new generation instead of being passed down like a hereditary illness. Children enter the world full of expectation and hope. They are not jaded. They are not cynical or resigned. They see clearly what custom has made invisible to us and are outraged by all injustices, no matter how small. It is through the agency of former children that the revolutionary potential of current children is held in check.

The disempowerment we all experienced as children has little outlet. We are taught to obey until our own turn comes, with few opportunities

to politicize the experience and critique it. Instead we are trained to wait it out, knowing that when we are older, we will acquire privileges. And in fact for many of the world's children, our early years include physical, sexual, and psychological violence so that we enter adulthood with a full load of trauma. But wherever we fall on the spectrum of the quality of our childhood, we all receive some degree of conditioning in powerlessness.

Rather than understanding childhood as a political as well as a developmental condition, we spend vast sums of money on therapy, if we can afford it, trying to unravel its contradictions at a personal level. The power relations of our childhood shape how we do or do not access our own power as adults, how we react to the authority of the state, employers, supervisors, professors. How we manage our impulses toward conformity or rebellion.

Because the condition is not permanent, and the nature of it changes throughout our childhood years, it is difficult to develop a collective political response to its injustices. At the same time, because it is not permanent, because we pass through it and know we will, some of us are able to make and keep commitments to remember what we know about childhood and try to change at least the personal experience of childhood for the next generation.

Childhood has never been a protected time of sweetness and innocence. While class privilege can shield young people from starvation, homelessness, and forced labor, the homes of the wealthy are just as likely to be abusive and traumatizing as those of the poor, often in much greater isolation.

Children make up the majority of the world's poorest people. Children are the most vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation and are a large proportion of the commercially raped. The working conditions of child labor worldwide are so bad that they are often indistinguishable from slavery. Without any form of political representation, children remain in many senses the property of the adults in their lives. It is illegal for them to run away—from abusive homes, from foster care, from state institutions.

The fact that many parents are deeply loving, fair, and committed to their children's well-being and may be their best allies in confronting injustice does not change the fact that this is largely a matter of luck for the child, who has almost no control over the conditions of daily life. Sometimes the state intervenes, ostensibly for the good of the child, but social

service agencies have a horrifying track record of using the removal of children from their families as a form of cultural genocide through forced assimilation. Most notorious is the removal of indigenous children, placed in boarding schools and white adoptive families, but the system also targets families of color in general, poor families, queer families, nontraditionally structured families—anyone who varies too far from the mythical ideal of the white, middle-class, heterosexual, two-parent nuclear family. In 1995 a Texas judge told Martha Laureano that by speaking only Spanish to her five-year-old daughter, she was abusing her and "relegating her to the position of a housemaid." He threatened to remove the girl from her mother's care if she didn't start speaking English to her, because "being ignorant is not in her best interest." This state enforcement of conformity at the family level makes children extremely vulnerable to being stripped of their culture and kinship.

We tolerate and accept for children a level of disenfranchisement that we would protest for any other constituency. Childhood is the standard for acceptable powerlessness. "They're just like children" is the classic statement of paternalistic racism and patriarchy. "Don't treat me like a child" is the outraged cry of the disrespected. We talk about the ways in which various groups are not admitted to full adulthood, how women were, and in many places still are, permanent legal minors, how the colonized are considered naïve, not ready for self-governance, deprived of sovereignty with the same air of protectiveness we extend to children.

In fact the arguments against the enfranchisement of children are identical to those used to oppose suffrage for women, immigrants, former slaves, the illiterate, and the poor in general. "They are innocent and cannot understand politics. They will be taken advantage of and manipulated by the political interests of those more sophisticated than they. They aren't ready for the responsibility." But what readies people for responsibility is being allowed to take some. People become informed and savvy about those areas of life where they can exercise some power. It is powerlessness that creates passivity. When children are treated with respect, given choices, and expected to have opinions that matter, they develop opinions and make choices. I wonder what it must have been like, what dignity it must have conferred on children of the Iroquois Confederacy that any child over three was welcome to speak about matters of group importance in the tribal council.

One of the most politicizing experiences of my life was the summer I spent in Cuba when I was fourteen. Overnight I found myself in a country in which fourteen-year-olds could make major life decisions—for instance, to join the merchant marine, drill with the militia, or choose special vocational training without parental permission. Suddenly adults were asking me what I thought the Johnson administration was going to do about this or that aspect of the Vietnam War, where the US economy was headed, what the long-term impact of the Black Panthers would be. It was surprising to be taken that much more seriously, in spite of the state of sexism in 1968.

But the real shock was returning to Chicago at the end of the summer. Once again I had to sit in enforced boredom in homeroom, raise my hand to go to the bathroom, get written permission to be in the hallway, and get picked up by the police for being outdoors after 10 p.m. or as a suspected runaway for being anywhere they didn't think a teenage girl should be. And my freedoms were expansive compared to those of many young people I knew. It was the summer in Cuba that made me less and less tolerant of high school and led to my dropping out, two years later, to take part in full-time activism.

Nevertheless children resist, both their own condition and the pressures to take on the perpetrator roles of the adults around them. Children have far less tolerance for overt injustice than do adults. From Soweto to Managua we have seen young people take to the streets, propelling mass movements forward into open rebellion almost faster than adults could build organizations behind them.

It is exciting and hopeful to me that we are seeing a growing international movement around child labor and sexual exploitation and that children are taking strong leadership positions within it.

A young Pakistani carpet weaver named Iqbal Masih escaped, while still a minor, from employers who had held him in virtual slavery from early childhood and immediately began speaking and organizing other child laborers. He decided he wanted to become a lawyer when he grew up in order to continue this work. He traveled to many countries, meeting with young students and building support for child labor campaigns. Then one day, while riding his bike, he was gunned down. High school students in Massachusetts who had met with him got on the internet and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to establish a school in his name

for child workers in Pakistan. Craig Kielburger, a young Canadian moved by this story, also became an international organizer and public speaker, forcing the Canadian government to include child labor issues in trade negotiations with Pakistan.

The liberation of children does not imply an end to parenting. The young of our species need care; support; teaching; membership in families, communities, and cultures; and access to our expertise. But they also need the former children around them to support their resistance to disempowerment, even when we are the ones inflicting it. They need us to listen deeply and with respect to the ways they experience the world, validate their sense of injustice, and help them understand the systemic nature of unfairness.

All solidarity movements must work hard to counteract the pull to think *for* the constituencies they ally themselves with. Those with privilege often have a hard time abandoning the conviction that they are more competent than those they want to support. As adults, we need to listen to children more than we talk to them. We must back the initiative of children themselves, secure resources and share skills, respect their right and ability to lead themselves, and learn to let them lead us.

This process, more than anything, will bring into our awareness and let us begin to repair the disempowerments of our own childhoods. As we do so, we will begin dismantling one of the most powerful ways that oppression reproduces itself.

ON NOT WRITING ENGLISH

Many years ago I was dickering with an editor, a feminist academic, about the changes she wanted to make in an article of mine, when she informed me that a line I had written was not English. She didn't mean that it was in Spanish or Swahili and would I please translate. She meant that the way I danced through syntax made her uneasy, that the grammar wasn't stacking up the way she liked it to. She was reminding me that she had a certificate of legitimacy and I didn't. "Sure, it's English," I replied. "It's just not your English." "No, really," she insisted. "It's not good English."

Good English, as I understand it, is a set of agreements about which words make sense, what they mean, and in what order they need to be used in order to keep making sense. It's an attempt to make sure that we understand each other. This is a reasonable goal. But the group that makes up these agreements and sets them down in rulebooks is a tiny fraction of the multitudes of people who successfully communicate in the English language each and every day.

What's more, these legislators of language, like those of government, are almost exclusively male, white, and wealthy, unlike the majority of English speakers. They are people with social power, and as is the wont of such folk, they set things up according to their own very specific needs and then declare those needs universal: if it isn't the language *we* speak, it isn't English.

I ain't gonna say ain't no more, 'cause ain't ain't in the dictionary. But some of the best English ain't. I am the daughter of a Bronx Puerto Rican mother and a Brooklyn Ashkenazi Jewish father, both college-educated, both in love with literature. I grew up reading nineteenth- and twentieth-century English novels, short stories, and poetry from England and the United States, most of it by white women and men of privilege. I speak that language and enjoy reading it. But there are some days when only the savory smokiness of a southern Black English come north to Chicago or the fancy code-switchin' salsera footwork of New York street Spanglish will do. They are no more or less mine by birth than the rolling English prose of George Eliot or the sharply stitched phrases of Jane Austen, but who in their right senses could deny the juiciness, the aliveness, the *right-ness* of such rich talk?

I am also the child of a bilingual family that delights in tongue acrobatics of mixed syntax and vocabulary. We write as we speak, in run-on sentences (if Faulkner could do it and be called great, why can't we?); in sentence fragments (if it's broken up on the page it's called poetry); in a Spanglish that freely combines the best of several worlds (like Saxons and Normans sitting down together to eat: pass the maldito venison, I mean the haunch of deer). What we create eventually passes into the dictionaries, because it is we who create language, the working people who are the majority. We refuse to use some talk and insist on others, and slowly, with plenty of squeaking, the gates open a crack and another "colloquialism" slips through. The process of "corruption," of making "bad English" is the same process that creates any language. A slow, volcanic seepage from below, constantly lifting up new mountain ranges, a shifting of earth, a sudden avalanche, people moving, adapting, finding new ways to say things and new things to say. Just as the Normans brought "poultry" to squat alongside "fowl," the English put on pajamas in India, and Puerto Rican men in the US Army turned "safety can" into *zafacón* and took it home to fill up with banana peels.

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate grammar. It's as useful as a good hoe for breaking up clods—those muddy clumps of language in which we find the woman sitting on the chair with green eyes and other oddities. But a hoe is a tool, not a gardener. A hoe can't tell you whether to plant sweet peas or okra. That depends on whether you have a greater need for color and scent or a big pot of gumbo.

Just last month it happened again. Asked to write from my very Puerto Rican Jewish poet perspective on a thorny little piece of island politics, yet another white academic feminist editor slashed her way through my prose, cutting out the personal pronouns with which I proclaimed my presence in the debates, and pumping it full of Latinate words. I told her I was not generic. That when I said "our" about my own culture, it was not a question of grammar but of politics; that when she crossed it out she was refusing to acknowledge that my "our" was different from hers, which was in fact the reason I was asked to write that particular essay; and that to seek out the insights of Women of Color and attempt to repackage them in someone else's language is opportunistic and disrespectful.

This is not a new conversation. Years ago, when I was a student at Mills College, a professor there told me that the problem with my stories was that they didn't spend enough time inside the individual angst of a central character and were much too concerned with community, and by the way, I should eliminate my sprinkling of Spanish words, since there was no audience for bilingual literature. It had never occurred to her that I wrote about community on purpose, within a strong Latin American tradition of collective protagonists, that I wasn't writing the way I did because I lacked insight or craft.

It's a catch-22 kind of deal. Rejecting the centrality of the elites is proof of our inferior understanding. Those who make up the rules of Good English try earnestly or contemptuously to edit us into conformity, convinced that when we talk a different talk it's because we are educationally or genetically impaired.

The fact is, as a steady diet, we find cucumber sandwiches, lamb stew, even crusty French bread tedious. Human speech is filled with delicious regional cuisines, spicy as Cajun peppers, delicate as almond curd. You mix basil with lemongrass, garlic with ginger, achiote with oregano: new dishes evolve every day as we trade flavors and ingredients from continents brought ever closer by the international marketplace.

It's not that we can't do baguettes and Brie. All peoples under attack learn the languages of those who can do us harm. We are multilingual of necessity. Those of us who, by using that language successfully, gain access to a small piece of public ground must fight continually to push our authenticity into print, onto the airwaves, into the classroom, out from the podium. We walk the narrow line of strategy, wielding Good English

like a club against the self-absorbed arrogance of those who want to hear only themselves speak, clearing spaces where we can broadcast our home voices, the kitchen talk and backyard talk, street corner and front porch talk that will choke us if we swallow it for too long. It's a guerrilla war against linguistic control, where sassy slang and precision-calibrated formalities are wielded in turn, as needed.

A day will come when our linguistic versatility will be excavated and displayed as a national treasure, when "English only" and "Good English only" will be ancient barbarities of self-defeating close-mindedness, studied in astonishment by schoolchildren who are as proud of the distinctive and varied flavors of talk they command as the most popular chefs in a contest of international and regional cookery.

In the meantime, remember that that little red pencil may get you convicted of war crimes against the creativity of our children. Remember that if you refuse our speech, you'll be left out of the conversation. Our numbers are growing, our languages multiplying and opening up the pavement like tough-rooted mint, like fists of crabgrass, like wildflowers in bloom.

FORKED TONGUES

On Not Speaking Spanish

1

To understand what we prose writers of the diaspora are doing, it is necessary to know why and how we are writing.[1] Storytelling is a basic human activity, with which we simultaneously make and understand the world and our place in it.

The world in which US Puerto Rican writing takes place, the context that most profoundly determines its form, is racism. Racism firmly rooted in class, both in the original class identities of those who migrated and in the enforcement of a persistent poverty on the diaspora community. Racism inseparably entangled with sexism in all its forms, multiplying the pain and exhaustion of Puerto Rican women and girls, of all of us fighting to survive deeply racialized forms of sexual and gender discrimination and violence. Unrelenting racism that permeates our daily lives in all its forms, from brutality and humiliation at the hands of the police, schools, and other institutions to the most subtle ways of making us disappear as human beings. Our history is stolen from us. We are stripped of our names. We are made into caricatures in a burlesque written by those who despise us or know nothing at all about us.

So the first and most important thing to understand is that we write from necessity, that our writing is a form of cultural and spiritual self-defense. To live surrounded by a popular culture in which we do not

appear is a form of spiritual erasure that leaves us vulnerable to all the assaults a society can commit against those it does not recognize. Not to be recognized, not to find oneself in history or in film or on television or in books or in popular songs or in what is studied at school leads to the psychic disaster of ceasing to recognize oneself. Our literature is documentation of an existence that doesn't matter a damn to those in charge. And like the forged passports of my paternal Jewish relatives, from time to time it saves our lives.

This is why we write: to see ourselves on the page. To confirm our presence. To clear a space where we can examine the lives we live, not as the sexy girlfriends, petty crooks, and crime victims of TV cop shows, and not as statistical profiles in which hardship, bravery, and resourcefulness lose all personality, but in our own physical and emotional reality. Where we can pull apart and explore this complex relationship we have with the island of our origins and kinship and this vast many-peopled country in which we are writing a new chapter of Puerto-Ricanhood. This necessity gives shape to our literature, to our urgent poetry of the streets, our ever so autobiographical fiction, our legends of collective identity. Most of what we write, we write under pressure.

2

And we do it in English, in Spanish, in a delicious blend of the two. Because one of our most important tools has been our creativity with language. Our linguistic sabotage, right and left. Anglo-American words transformed into Puerto-Ricanisms revealing no trace of their gringo ancestry, like zafacón, or waste basket, stolen from the military "safety can." Words we borrow from Jewish neighbors, African American coworkers, Irish American nuns. We have invented the language we most needed, and it is at least as authentic as the well-educated Spanish, with its baroque flourishes, of any scholarly poet basking in the approval of the Real Academia.

Like any language, it is born from history. The Spanish, or rather Spanishes, that are used on the island grew out of an identical process of change and accumulation: Taíno fragments sticking to places and plants, Africanisms of daily use, traces of the Berber conquest of Spain, like the countrywoman's hopeful ojalá, "May it come to pass, oh Allah." Particular

juicy tidbits from dozens of passionately particular places in Spain; idiomatic baggage brought by refugees fleeing American revolutions from Haiti to Colombia; linguistic recipes and verbal cuttings carried by Corsican, Mallorcan, French, Caribbean, and US immigrants of the past century. Adding the professional and popular Anglicisms of this century is just salt in the sancocho.[2]

3

Because our writing is testimony, written under pressure, in words we invent to describe what official language is totally inadequate for, we specialize in fiction with an autobiographical flavor. In the cultural context of racism, sometimes autobiography approaches science fiction. But on the whole, tales of invention and the fantastic have not interested us as much as the defiance of our daily lives. It is there that we struggle for an authentic cultural terrain, in which we are what we are, without asking anyone's pardon. Only in this way can we go beyond nostalgia on the one hand and camouflage on the other. In our multigenre collection *Getting Home Alive* (Firebrand, 1986), my mother, Rosario Morales, writes, "I am what I am. . . . Boricua as Boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan. . . . Take it or leave me alone," and I respond, "I am a child of the Americas. . . . I am new, history made me. My first language was Spanglish. I was born at the crossroads, and I am whole."

4

And what of our relationship to literary and cultural production on the island? The greatest obstacle, until very recently, to the development of this relationship has been arrogance. Arrogance of class, race, and gender, with a strong flavor of the nationalistic and the patriarchal. That same arrogance that the migrants, historically the poorest and darkest of our population, and those women who, for lack of resources or inclination, couldn't play their assigned role in the stories of the señores, hoped to leave behind them. This disdain for the oppressed, one of those inherited luxuries the regime continues to permit to the colonial elite, has framed all attempts at dialogue. The island elite persists in seeing the creators of this new diaspora culture as runaway children who lack the maturity and

discrimination to return to the Hispanic house from which we supposedly came, although the African house has sheltered us through generations of exile and rebellion, and we have lived in a house of American mestizaje for a very long time now.

Those who partake of this anachronistic view tend to see our writings as scribbles in the margins of real literature, undeserving of serious study. They market their books to Argentina and Mexico and turn their cultured backs with a shudder on Hartford and Philadelphia. The Real Academia, supremely irrelevant as it is to the South Bronx, continues to be at the least a point of navigation to those who feel that four generations of creative ferment in Harlem have nothing to say to them. The truth is that more than half of all Puerto Ricans have taken part in the creation of this new culture, and it is more than possible that the future vitality of island culture will depend on recognizing and celebrating this fact.

5

Migration has changed us in more than geographical ways. In spite of our passionate identification with the island and its people, we are no longer who we were. Ours is a diaspora continually in motion, swinging between the island of Puerto Rico and the cities of the United States.[3] To the degree that the realities of this continually shifting life have freed us of the nostalgic idealizations of earlier generations, it has become possible for us to look at island society with new eyes.

The same constant negotiations of identity that come with a multilingual, multicultural, multilandscape existence give us a sharp ear for unspoken social arrangements that perhaps requires distance and dispossession. We are part of one extended family, but we live under a different roof, and from here we have a new angle on the family scandals, among them a racism that is less segregated but no less deep-rooted and wounding than that of the United States.

A personal example: During my childhood in Puerto Rico, my father worked as an associate professor on a modest salary. But in Indiera Baja of Maricao, where I grew up, having any kind of a salary made you rich. In a community where many women still cooked outdoors over a wood fire, hauled water from a spring, washed all clothing by hand, where the first refrigerators had just begun arriving and where cash hardly ever passed

through women's hands, to be the daughter of a professor was to be privileged almost to the point of aristocracy. What's more, I was one of the blanquitas. They called me rubia and americanita. Perhaps if my family had stayed there, I would have accepted, with a greater or lesser degree of comfort, this role of artificial importance.

But at the age of thirteen I was taken to Chicago and was suddenly transformed from the American's daughter to the daughter of that Puerto Rican from Harlem who laughs too much and talks with her hands. From almost aristocracy to a lower level of the academic middle class and, most of all, from rubia to spic. At the same time that I lost my literal color in the long winters of Illinois, I acquired social color. In my new world, I was defined by others, and eventually by myself, as a US Woman of Color. In this broad community born of collective resistance to our grinding down by class and gender and so-called race, in the vital conversations between American women whose roots were indigenous, African, Chinese, Japanese, Chicana, I was apprenticed. I was born as a writer within a literary movement that was antiracist, working class, feminist, and very, very multicultural, where among so much struggle for our full legitimacy, that I was an immigrant Puerto Rican Jew didn't cause anyone to bat an eye.

6

In my case, this was the most important transformation: the detailed and sophisticated understanding of how day-to-day racism acts, what it smells like, what face it wears. It's a kind of sixth sense acquired by those who need it. For my mother, the essential thing was her identification with working people from every continent, whom the currents of the world market had deposited in the neighborhoods of New York. For Carmen de Monteflores, it was the physical and cultural distance that allowed her, in her novel *Cantando Bajito/Singing Softly*, to examine the consequences of class, race, and illicit sexual encounters in three generations of an island family something like her own. Judith Ortiz Cofer, in her autobiography in prose and poetry, *Silent Dancing*, uses the double vision of her nomadic life between Puerto Rico and New Jersey to explore the dangers and delights, bitterness and confusion of female sexuality in Puerto Rican culture.

Yes, another thing that can be seen from under this other roof is the rigidity of the island patriarch. In a small and gossip-ridden island, anything

you do anywhere is known to everyone, which makes it much easier to enforce the social controls of his regime. In the gigantic, anonymous cities where most migrants have landed there are traditions already many generations old of defiance of social norms. City people are used to nonconformity, and it's easy to live all kinds of lives, the rumors of which will never reach your parents' living room. This liberalism of urban life persists, even in a period of social repression like the one we live in now, and it provides a vital support for the development of a wider range of gender identities and sexual behaviors among immigrant Puerto Ricans, women and men.[4]

The literature of the diaspora is a literature of multiple vision, born of the intersections of oppression and resistance. This multiplicity has given us the tools to challenge inherited identities of gender, class, and "race," and through it we have found a way to affirm our complex realities. It is this complexity, this many-sided seeing, this daring to name the uses and practices of power wherever they are found, that is our greatest gift—to the emerging cultures of the diaspora and to the changing island culture of Puerto Rico.

NOTES

1. Although much has changed for Puerto Ricans on the island and in the US, and therefore in our literature, since 1998, the arguments I make in this essay still hold: our diaspora literature is shaped by oppression and our resistance to it, and the complexities of that struggle continue to give us fresh and critical perspectives on both diaspora and island life.

2. A typical Puerto Rican stew made of meat and many kinds of starchy vegetables.

3. This is not the case with the Hawaiian Puerto Rican community, much of which has had no contact with the island since the turn of the century.

4. The degree to which homophobia in Puerto Rico represents a significant factor in migration has yet to be explored. Anecdotally, though, many young Puerto Ricans in the US have told me that this was a major reason for their own departure.

CERTIFIED ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

I have begun this essay a hundred times, in a hundred different ways, and each time I have struggled with the same deadly numbing of my mind. Hashing it out once again with my parents on the phone, this time we go for the food metaphors. When I was a child in rural Puerto Rico, the people around me ate produce grown on local soil, chickens that roamed the neighborhood, bananas cut from the stalk. It was unrefined, unpackaged, full of all those complex nutrients that get left out when the process is too tightly controlled. But during the last few years before we emigrated, advertising finally penetrated into our remote part of the island. Cheez Whiz on Wonder Bread was sold to country women as a better, more sophisticated, modern, advanced, and healthy breakfast than boiled root vegetables and codfish, or rice and beans.

When I call myself an organic intellectual, I mean that the ideas I carry with me were grown on soil I know, that I can tell you about the mineral balance, the weather, the labor involved in preparing them for use. In the marketplace of ideas, we are pushed toward the supermarket chains that are replacing the tiny rural colmado, told that store-bought is better, imported is best, and sold on empty calories in shiny packaging instead of open crates and barrels of produce to which the earth still clings.

The intellectual traditions I come from create theory out of shared lives instead of sending away for it. My thinking grew directly out of listening to

my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened. This is the central process of consciousness raising, of collective testimonio. This is how homemade theory happens.

In the women's consciousness-raising groups I belonged to in the early 1970s, we shared personal and very emotional stories of what it had really been like for us to live as women, examining our experiences with men and with other women in our families, sexual relationships, workplaces and schools, in the health care system and in surviving the general societal contempt and violence toward women. As we told our stories we found validation that our experiences and our reactions to them were common to many women, that our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings made sense to other women. We then used that shared experience as a source of authority. Where our lives did not match official knowledge, we trusted our lives and used the collective and mutually validated body of stories to critique those official versions of reality. This was theory born of an activist need, and the feminist literature we read, from articles like "The Politics of Housework" and "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" to the poetry of Susan Griffin, Marge Piercy, Alta, Judy Grahn, and others, rose out of the same mass phenomenon of truth-telling from personal knowledge.

I am also the child of two cultures of resistance. I grew up jíbara, a word that means "countrified" and is used to romanticize the imaginary simple and noble coffee workers of yesteryear and as a put-down somewhat akin to "hick." But which originally meant, in the language of the Arawak people, "people of the forest," and was applied to the mixed-blood settlements of escaped slaves, fugitive Indians, and European peasants who took to the mountains to escape state control. I was raised in one of those settlements, listening to women talk.

I grew up in a family of activists who were thinking about race and class and gender and the uses of history and literature long before there were college courses to do this in, a mother who was a feminist in the 1950s, a father who told me bedtime stories about African and Chinese history and taught biology as a liberation science. I grew up as the tropical branch of a tribe of working-class Jewish thinkers who were critiquing the canons of their day from the shtetls of Eastern Europe, arguing about

identity politics and coalitions, assimilation and solidarity way back into the previous century. I grew up out of the tangled roots of Puerto Rican history, sprang from slave and slaveholder, from publishers of seditious newspapers, liberal autonomists, Spanish soldiers, and secret nationalists, fighting over independence, colony and kingdom, emancipation and feminism, and the meaning of freedom.

How I think and what I think about grows from my identity as a jíbara shtetl intellectual and organizer. I was taught to trust in these traditions, in the reliability of my own intelligence combined with that of others.

But as academic feminism drifts further and further from its activist roots, as the elite gobbledygook of postmodernist jargon and gender studies makes it less and less acceptable to speak comprehensibly, I have more and more often found my trust in myself under assault.

I watch my life and my theorizing about it become the raw materials of someone else's expertise and am reminded of the neem tree of India, used for millennia as an insect repellent, only to be patented by a multinational pharmaceutical company. Peasant women developed the technology for extracting and preparing the oil for local use, but to multinationals, local use is a waste. The exact same process, done at much higher volume and packaged for export, can be owned and put in the bank. My intellectual life and that of other organic intellectuals, many of us Women of Color, is fully sophisticated enough for use. But in order to have value in the marketplace, the entrepreneurs and multinational developers must find a way to process it, to refine the rich multiplicity of our lives and all we have come to understand about them into high theory, by the simple act of removing it, abstracting it beyond recognition, taking out the fiber, boiling it down until the vitality is oxidized away, and then marketing it as their own and selling it back to us for more than we can afford.

The local colmado of Barrio Rubias, which is just across a dirt road from Barrio Indiera Baja, where I was raised, used to sell two kinds of cheese. Queso holandés, Dutch edam cheese, came in great big balls covered with red wax. If it molded, it did so from the outside in, so the center remained good and one could trim the green from the rind. Or you could buy something called "imitation processed cheese food product." Both began in the mammary glands of cows. But the processed cheese food product, like its

modern relatives Velveeta and individually plastic-wrapped Kraft Singles, were barely identifiable with any of the processes of their production, and what's more, when they spoiled, they did so thoroughly. All the capacity for resistance of a solid cheese with a rind had been refined away. Nevertheless they often sold better. The packaging was colorful, mysteriously sealed, difficult to open.

We have been well trained to be consumers of glossy boxes, Ziploc bags, child-proof bottles, and copious amounts of plastic wrap and Styrofoam. We are taught to be distrustful of bulk foods and rely on brand-name recognition. The students I work with have been taught to give books so much more authority than they give themselves that with the best will to comply, they find it very challenging to write autobiographical responses to readings and lectures. What they know best how to do is arrange the published opinions of other people in a logical sequence, restating one or another school of thought on the topic at hand.

When the package is difficult to penetrate, they rarely ask why the damn thing has to be wrapped up so tight. They assume the problem is with their minds. When I first reentered higher education, as a middle-aged professional writer with many years of public speaking behind me, even with all the confidence these things gave me, I felt humiliated by the impenetrable language in which academic thinking comes wrapped these days. At first I thought it was just a matter of overcoming my awkwardness with jargon. That it was just a lack of training. Like recently decolonized countries that embrace all the shiny wonders of nuclear energy, determined to have what the empire has had all along, I thought this slick new arrangement of words just needed to be acquired.

But I no longer think this. The language in which ideas are expressed is never neutral. The language people use reveals important information about who they identify with, what their intentions are, for whom they are writing or speaking. The packaging is the product being sold and does exactly what is was designed for. Unnecessarily specialized language is used to humiliate those who are not supposed to feel entitled. It sells the illusion that only those who can wield it can think.

A frequent response to those of us who resist exclusive language is that we are intellectually lazy. Like other forms of gatekeeping, the whole point is to make us think we, not the gatekeepers, are responsible for whether or not we get in. We must stop what we are doing, forget what we came for,

and devote our energies to techniques of breaking and entering. We are required to do this just to win the right to argue. If we are uninterested, we are assumed to be incompetent. But my choice to read the readable has to do with a different set of priorities. Language is wedded to content, and the content I seek is theory and intellectual practice that will be of use to me in an activist scholarship whose priorities are democratizing.

At the time that I was first struggling to hold onto my own intellectual integrity within academia I had little validation in my daily life for these feelings. I struggled to be a "good student" and to complete the work I was assigned. When most of what I read seemed shallow or irrelevant to my work, when I wondered if feminist theory shouldn't be more exciting to me than this, I was uneasily certain that I must be missing something. Perhaps, I thought, this was just a lack of analytical skills that I would pick up in time. But most of what I read was so many levels of abstraction away from activist intentions and lived experience, from the problems I wanted to solve, that it came to seem more and more a meaningless illusion, spinning concepts in the air that never landed anywhere, academic in the other sense of the word, disconnected from daily use, irrelevant, beside the point.

To fully understand these arguments, to decipher and engage with them, I would have had to abandon what I cared most about and devote most of my time to the study of conflicting theories written in arcane code, instead of doing my chosen work with and about my own people.

Now, looking back, I remember my life in the feminist movement of the early 1980s. At conference after conference I would stand in the hall trying to choose between the workshop or caucus for Women of Color and the one for Jews. Every doorway I tried to enter required leaving some part of myself behind. In those hallways, I began meeting other women, the complexity of whose lives defied the simplifications of identity politics. In conversation with them I found the only reflections of my full reality. Much of the feminist theory I tried to read in graduate school was written in rooms whose doors were too narrow. They required me to leave myself and my deepest intellectual passions outside.

The place of validation I finally found was with those same women, the ones who had survived against all odds, in this case Latina feminist

scholars who, the moment we found a venue where we could gather and talk alone, began making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else. We had come together under a grant to look at comparative research on US Latinas, but as soon as we began introducing ourselves, telling our intellectual autobiographies to people who understood them, we rewrote the proposal and instead entered a multiyear process of telling our life stories and then drawing forth theory from them on our own terms. The most tangible result is our book *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, but the intangible depths of the experience have to do with establishing and protecting the sovereignty of our own minds.

This is the garden of my intellect, organic because it grows from its own soil and is an expression of mineral content, weather, and surrounding plant and animal life, because it is free of pesticides designed to disrupt nature for profit, because it hasn't been packaged for any market but was grown to satisfy the hungers of me and mine.

BAN ME!

> To former Arizona state superintendent of public instruction Tom Horne, former Arizona state superintendent of public instruction John Huppenthal, and the Tucson Unified School District

I am writing to protest discriminatory actions on your part that amount to defamation of my character and that of my mother, Rosario Morales. You have not placed a single one of our books on your list of titles to be banned from the public school curriculum!

It's true that we are Puerto Rican, not Mexican, but we are just as committed to destroying the status quo as our compatriot Martin Espada, and you banned him. I am not from any of the First Nations of Arizona, and Taínos have never lived in your state in significant numbers (though you did bring a bunch of us to pick cotton in the 1920s), but you banned Sherman Alexie, who is from the Pacific Northwest, so it can't be about regionalism.

You banned people as different from one another as Henry David Thoreau and Mumia Abu Jamal, so why not us? I have dedicated my life to the promotion of solidarity, to telling the stories of the oppressed, and to cultivating our resistance. I have written history rooted in the knowledge and perspectives of my indigenous and African ancestors, which are not based on Greco-Roman knowledge and therefore, according to your

definitions, lie outside the bounds of Western civilization and should not be taught.

Like Howard Zinn and Ron Takaki, I am a people's historian. Like bell hooks, Betita Martínez, and Gloria Anzaldúa, I am a feminist/womanist of color. My Back has been a Bridge. I have rethought not only Columbus but all the conquistadores and crusaders you admire. I have sung the praises of Tecumseh and Jigonsaseh and Urayoán, who were likewise dedicated to organizing their people, and advocated the overthrowing of any government built on genocide, conquest, and exploitation. I don't, it's true, bother with instigating mere resentment. I go straight for rage and its beautiful daughter, esperanza.

My mother, Rosario, boldly stated, "I will not eat myself up inside anymore. I am going to eat you." She said she was what she was. She wrote a master's thesis calling anthro-god Claude Lévi-Strauss a racist, and she made fun of him too.

In the spring of 1933, Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels called for a literary cleansing by fire, to purge the "un-German" spirit from educational institutions, "purify" German language and literature, uphold "traditional German values," and turn the universities into centers of nationalist propaganda. Like you, he was worried about civilization. Mobs of nationalists pulled books from the shelves of college libraries (including the works of Ernest Hemingway, Helen Keller, and Jack London) and threw them on bonfires in the streets. German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose books were honored in the flames, wrote a poem on behalf of those, like myself, who were not selected, establishing a precedent for my complaint.

In "The Burning of the Books" he wrote of "a banished writer, one of the best," who scanned the lists of burned books and, like me, "was shocked to find that his books had been passed over." The writer rushed to his desk "on wings of wrath" and wrote to those in power, "Burn me! Haven't my books always reported the truth? And here you are, treating me like a liar! I command you! Burn me!"

By failing to ban *Getting Home Alive, Medicine Stories,* and *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas,* you are treating me like a liar instead of a digger for the roots of truth, like a scribe for the imperial chronicles of Fox News instead of the many-colored codices of liberation, like a sad assimilationist longing to be just like you, instead

of the fierce, malanga-eating, mixed-blood madre poeta bruja revolucionaria that I am. You are insulting the memory and tarnishing the reputation of my mother, who spat in the eye of colonial anthropology and the FBI. You have committed libel by omission.

Like the banished German poet of Brecht's poem, for myself, and for my Bronx Boricua mama, whose ghost can still eat you, I write on wings of wrath: Ban me! I command you! Ban me!

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THE TRIBE OF GUARAYAMÍN

The master's tools will never dismantle
the master's house.

—AUDRE LORDE

LEAVING THE MASTER'S HOUSE

One of the results of prolonged oppression is that our vision becomes polarized into the two possibilities of the abused and the abuser, so that sometimes the only picture we can form of liberation is to sit on the same throne we have been forced to kneel before, to take possession of the castle without stopping to examine whether it is in fact fit for human habitation. Sometimes when we're working the hardest to restore a sense of our place in history, we get seduced into trying yet again to prove that our people are just as capable as our oppressors of meeting the crooked standards of excellence of conquistadores and slaveholders. Reactive history is still in the grip of imperial thinking and always sacrifices someone to imperial dreams.

We have feminist histories that celebrate as models those European queens who were able to independently wield their enormous class power to extract wealth from the poor and managed their own wars of conquest. There are Afrocentric scholars who, in order to restore dignity to the formerly colonized and enslaved, glorify African kingdoms and empires built on wars of conquest, enslavement of other Africans, and the subjugation of women and attribute the varied and sophisticated accomplishments of Mesoamerican and South American civilizations to small but incredibly influential groups of visitors from Mali, Phoenicia,

and Egypt, portraying the people of the Americas as passive recipients of culture, exactly as Eurocentric scholars have done with Africans.

There are versions of Mexican history that glorify only Aztec society, which believed that the sun must be raised each morning by the spirits of young warriors tortured and sacrificed, only to be dragged into darkness each night by the spirits of women dead in childbirth, and pretend that the rise of empires has no downside for the surrounding peoples. The story of Malintzin, also known as Malinche, is a good example. Hernán Cortés's interpreter was a Tabascan woman sold into slavery to the Aztecs and given to Cortes as a gift. Her name has become synonymous with those who collaborate with their oppressors and betray their people. But the Aztecs were not her people. They were her oppressors. And she had no choice about interpreting for Cortes, or having sex with him, or with the man Cortes gave her to when he was done.

These versions of history are dangerously simplistic, sacrificing the contradictions and complexities of real people in favor of heroic mythologies. In doing so they undermine our accountability to each other, but they also undermine more expansive ideas of liberation by not questioning what it means for a culture to be admirable. The capacity to dominate one's neighbors, kill them, enslave them, loot them, and extract tribute from them; the ability to keep enforcing upon the population a series of bosses from the same families who accumulate wealth faster than anyone else; the construction, with stolen wealth and forced labor, of large buildings, roads, bridges, ornate tombs and temples—this is called civilization and held up for admiration. This is the hunter glorifying the hunt.

Truly radical history can't recycle that mythology. Our goal is not to put new personnel into the same old job descriptions. The history of twentieth-century decolonization has certainly taught us that independence is not the same as liberation. Without a conscious and deep-rooted transformation of culture and economy, new faces in the old colonial palaces end up giving the same kinds of orders.

If we continue to use the word "noble" to mean a person of high moral principles and fine personal qualities, we uphold the narrative of an aristocracy whose power is based on superiority. If we admire queens more than mill workers and millet farmers, we buy into the creation myths of the elites. We need to be consciously and comprehensively radical about what aspects of our history we offer our communities as sources of pride.

It is a well-documented aspect of captivity and abuse that we can come to long for the approval of our captors, even when our stance is defiant. When being fully respected doesn't appear to be an option, and we are under the full weight of other people's greedy and brutal disregard for us, domination can look downright charismatic, and some of us set out to prove we can be as good at it as they are. If the rationale for our oppression is that we are biologically incapable of rule, we can come to believe that ancient rulership is evidence of our past humanity.

It's easy to get sucked into envy instead of righteous anger and watch *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* instead of exposing the decisions that the rich and famous make every day that lead directly to suffering. Radical history has to consciously and persistently undermine the pull of the abused to admire and mimic the abusers.

Instead we need to look for what is actually useful to us on the roads our ancestors have traveled and build on the best of their many choices. In *Africa in History*, Basil Davidson concludes a section on the emerging medieval kingdoms of West Africa by pointing out that this emphasis is deceptive: what West Africa should really be famous for is the sophistication of its social organization at the local level, the democracy of village life, and those societies that grew better at balance instead of better at domination. Pursuing this notion in my book *Remedios*, I wrote the following piece for my own section on the West African roots of Puerto Rican society:

> Those who have lived too long in the shadows of empire look only for kings and monuments and pass the villages by. They run after glittering stories of Greater Ghana, Mali and Songhay, of manikongos and sunnis, of Mansa Musa and Sundiata and the lords of Benin. There they will find the familiar power struggles of dynasties and war parties, conquests and looting. But we will step off that path and take a walk among the small societies, where Africa is born again each season and balance is found again and again.
>
> Kingship is a blunt and clumsy tool compared to the intricate and flexible life of the villages. Power does not pile up at the top where it can topple and fall in ruins. Power falls like seed planted in a field. Each head of a family, each leader of a clan has no more than can be held in two hands and scatters it no farther than it can be thrown in

a single gesture. Each village runs its own affairs but no neighboring village stands alone. The people of the small societies make patterns of loyalty and mutual obligation, as elaborate and elegant as the regalia of royalty, and of far more practical use.

THE TALE OF GUARAYAMÍN

Over the past few years several different and competing groups have emerged in the US Puerto Rican community claiming to be the Taíno Nation, legitimate heirs to the Arawak people who lived throughout the northwestern Caribbean islands. Some years ago, I began receiving email communiques from the different groups, each claiming to be the *real* Taínos. This phenomenon has received a lot of attention and provoked considerable heated discussion in the Puerto Rican community. Debate is polarized into two equally rigid positions. Position 1, upheld primarily by some academics, says the Island Arawaks disappeared leaving little or no trace by 1550, have had little ongoing impact on Puerto Rican culture, and any views to the contrary are romantic wishful thinking. Position 2, that of the various Taíno nations, says, "We are the real Arawaks, who have survived all attempts to exterminate us, and anyone who says we aren't is collaborating with a centuries-long tradition of genocide." It is strongly implied that creating tribal affiliation for the Puerto Rican descendants of the Arawaks bestows more authenticity and legitimacy on them than the complexities of mixed heritage do.

On the one hand, it is certainly true that the repartimientos that scattered Arawak villages into forced labor and divided up the limited amount of farm land of a small island among the Spanish invaders, pandemics of European diseases, and the introduction of large numbers of slaves, some from other areas of the Americas and most of them kidnapped Africans from many nations, all led to a widespread disintegration of organized Arawak communities and traditional social structures by the mid-sixteenth century. The only records of Arawak culture available to us are filtered through the interpretations of Spanish priests and chroniclers who reported the conquest, or more recent anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists poring over fragments of language and pottery, and by comparison with related cultures in Guyana and Venezuela.

On the other hand, it is a long-standing colonial practice to declare people extinct for a range of reasons, none of them benevolent. The survival of a culture isn't a simple yes-no proposition. As invaded people try to cope with conquest, they try a lot of different things: accommodating, resisting, fleeing, blending. And they survive in some ways and not in others. That Arawak influence died a complete death in 1550 is very unlikely. But the presence or absence of the Arawak people has been politically manipulated from the beginning of colonialism on the island. The place I grew up in, called Indiera, registered a population of nearly two thousand people who called themselves indios in 1797, the last year in which that category was included in the census. As a child, I certainly saw people with strongly indigenous features, referred to by others as indios. It is a legitimate part of our task to ask in what ways Arawak people and cultural know-how may have escaped the notice of biased observers.

But why reconstitute one portion of our heritage as a tribe, and why now? Rooted in an idealized "pure" past, the creation of a small but culturally life-supporting nation reenacting a memory of sovereignty is, in a limited way, medicinal. In a time of deteriorating conditions, both economic and political, with our communities living under attack in a climate of contempt, to declare ourselves the doggedly surviving remnants of a people said to have been wiped out centuries ago is certainly a way of harnessing history toward resistance. But it is a flawed defiance. For one thing, the authority it generates is for a small group of men who have chosen themselves—an infinitely useful authority since there is no intact lineage of knowledge or reliable written record to contradict whatever the new caciques decide to do or say. As is often the case with groups based in nationalist pride and a vision of the past, the new tribes appear to be strongly male-dominated and hierarchical. Their reconstruction has made them all into caciques.

But more important, that defiance is built on a lie about who we are. It turns its back on the real survival our ancestors engineered, the ingenuity of combined wits and intricate relationships. The attempt to portray themselves as "pure" Arawaks, in spirit if not in actuality, after five centuries of unrestrained intermixture, contains a rejection of our strong African roots. It erases the indigenous people brought to our island from all the coasts of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, who blended early on

with the Arawak survivors of the encomienda. And it rejects the presence in all of us of Spanish immigrants, most of them peasants, mulatto Haitian refugees, Lebanese peddlers, and Corsican coffee farmers who also lived on yuca up in the hills. Instead this story relies on an almost mystical notion of an Arawak "essence" that can guide us through the violence and poverty inflicted on our communities, back to a golden age of rulership rather than forward in multicultural alliance to a just contemporary society.

In a climate of intensifying racism, it has great appeal, especially to young US Puerto Ricans seeking a source of uncomplicated pride, and the racist and genocidal romanticism of US society toward Native Americans, placing living people firmly in a vanished past, makes Arawak identity seem uncomplicated. But complexity is the only ground of real possibility for us.

When my brother and I first heard of this phenomenon in communiqués signed by lists of men with brand-new Arawak names, we began inventing some for ourselves, words with multilingual sounds and meanings that had us rolling with laughter in the unrepentant mestiza's irreverent defiance of blood categories. We called ourselves Yaveriguaré (I'll soon find out) and Casimorí (I almost died), Yamefuí (I already left), and my personal favorite, the indignant inquiry "Guarayamín" (Say it out loud.)

We intended no disrespect toward the culture of the Arawak ancestors we also share, nor of the people who are no doubt sincere in reaching for what is to be gained from nation-making. Our laughter was that particular biting humor born from the experience of being completely misrepresented: we are the mixed among the mixed, children of a Puerto Rican mother and a Ukrainian Jewish father, and concepts of ethnic purity have weighed on us from childhood. But it is also a laughter born from trust in the versatility of our people, our capacity to invent and reinvent ourselves in the face of every attempt to shame us.

However tempting the apparent security of a simplistic heritage may be, however addictive the lottery player's dream of moving to the penthouse, however compelling the urge to prove ourselves with rosters of warriors and kings, what our ancestors have bequeathed us is of far greater value. Our worthiness as a people has never rested with caciques or señores. Our beauty is not in any one strand of our inheritance, but

in the rich weave of contradictory traits that a long history of struggling next to, with, and against each other has left us: our stubborn capacity to survive, our wicked humor at the expense of the powerful, our ability to use anything and everything we find, our gift for enjoyment.

There's a question, full of commentary, that we the skeptical use when faced with assertions by the pretentious of "pure" Spanish or at least European ancestry: "Y tu abuela, ¿donde está?" (And your grandmother—where is she?). An assertion by the dark and poor that we have been mingling too long for that sort of nonsense, and if all your grandmothers were in the room, you couldn't get away with this obvious lie.

The real stories we need to be telling and asking about are the ones that include all those grandmothers, dark and light and in between. In them we will find the courage to abandon the false security of the master's house, with its centuries-thick foundation of lies, and embrace the shifting, dynamic, uncertain, and contradictory realities we have inherited. Because mythologizing our pasts in the image of the master's present, as if the sum of our yearning was to occupy his place, is an injury to the authentically free future we want for our children, for our peoples, for the world.

TAÍNO CITIZENSHIP

In the eighteen years since I wrote "The Tribe of Guarayamín," there have been significant changes in in the politics of indigenous identity in the Americas. Most powerful among them is the resurgence of Latin American sovereignty, with a strong core of indigenous leadership, much of it female. Evo Morales, an Aymara man, is president of Bolivia, with a new Constitution that renames it as a plurinational state, in recognition of its indigenous nations. Universities, radio stations, courtrooms carry on their business in indigenous languages, and long idle lands of latifundista families have been reclaimed and distributed to campesinxs, some of whom have become, under the new indigenous autonomy laws, self-governing communities for the first time in five hundred years.

I have also learned a great deal about the legacies of attempted genocide, about inherited trauma and resurgent memory. The bickering among splinter groups of self-appointed Taíno caciques has died down and been largely replaced by more responsible, productive, and inclusive groupings, and after twenty-five years of negotiations, the United Nations has passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And I have embarked on my own process of addressing the historical trauma in my family stemming from our indigenous heritage and found it a deeply healing, centering, grounding experience. All of these factors inform this new piece.

All across the Americas, a process of reclaiming and defending indigenous rights, knowledge, and leadership, rooted in the revolutionary urgencies of our time, is in bloom. At the center of that urgency is the devastation wrought upon the biosphere within which we exist, which industrial society has treated with contempt as a collection of raw materials for the generation of wealth. Indigenous peoples are taking the lead in many parts of the global movement to restore ecological balance, not because indigenous people are inherently more ecological but because the traditional economies of indigenous peoples tend to be more integrated into and require deeper knowledge of and respect for local ecosystems, and many traditional indigenous cultures both reflect values of respect and care for the natural world and have significant expertise in practicing those values. As a result, the impact of ecological destruction is more intimate, more immediate, and more obviously tied to short-term as well as long-term survival than is true for many nonindigenous people.

This current wave of interest in reclaiming indigenousness is not exempt from the usual cultural appropriation by nonnative people, or simplistic idealizations of indigenous societies. Neither is it exempt from various forms of racist ridicule and attack. But there is also a growing collective effort on the part of those of us whose specific knowledge of our native heritage was taken from us, whom attempted genocide and our own people's survival strategies have robbed of genealogical certainty, to craft a contemporary mestiza identity that honors our deepest American roots.[1]

If we are forced to pick through the manuscripts of chronicler priests who came and went in the company of brutal swordsmen, trying to decipher the language and beliefs of our people, to string nouns of old red clay onto nylon threads of invented grammar, so what? We must assume that any written explanation of what our ancestors thought has been so heavily filtered through misinterpretation that it would have them rolling on the floor, but when we decide that the words for "good" and "moon" can become our bedtime parting phrase, when we knot together our few verbs into sentences that would have made them stare, when we shape our mouths around Taínosounds, as understood by long gone Spanish

men, and say *Guakia guaitiao*, "We are friends," something important takes place, some shifting of the monumental loss our people endured.

Over the past few years there have been several bitterly fought rounds of "We are the Taínos / The Taínos are dead," usually sparked by publications claiming the literal descent of Puerto Ricans from the Taíno people. They quickly become pissing contests over credentials and authority to speak, full of contemptuous innuendo and haughty repartee. The battles appear to be about evidence, about DNA and yellowed documents, linguistic analysis and anthropological treatises, and the utter idiocy and incompetence of one's opponents.

Most of the time I don't participate because I'm not interested in the questions being debated. As best I can tell, the science is not yet in place, despite all the hype of ancestral genetic testing sites, to answer with any degree of confidence whether and to what degree living Puerto Ricans are descended from Taíno people who lived in Boriken at the time of the Spanish invasion.

But it's also beside the point. Identity isn't primarily genetic. It's political, social, cultural, collective, constructed. The more interesting question to me is, What's at stake? Any debate this fierce is not just about evidence and credentials. I can answer that only for myself. What's at stake for me is what's always at stake: how we understand our history and what we do with it.

I should state right here that I was born and raised in Barrio Indiera Baja of Maricao, a region that, in 1797, had two thousand or so people who identified themselves to census takers as indios. That I grew up finding shards of Taíno pottery and broken stone ax heads in the river, that there were people who showed up, perhaps once or twice a year, at the small country store, short of stature, with broad faces, coppery skin, and straight black hair, who lived in remote, off-road places, bought only metal tools and other manufactured goods, and who called themselves indios, too. That my mother's profile, her high cheekbones and backslanting brow, who she felt herself part of, the strands of familial story clinging to that profile, her buried rage and despair, are every bit as good as a double helix to me.

I am also a student of attempted genocide, historical trauma, uprooted memory and the denial, by colonists, of the existence of the people whose land and resources they take. I have a bias toward the existence of people

who are said to be extinct, especially by those who tried to extinguish them.

In 2000 I interviewed an old woman in Indiera whose grandmother had been captured, in the early days of the mountain coffee economy, and forced into servitude on a hacienda. She spoke an indigenous language and did not wear European clothing or eat what hacendados ate. She had to be locked in a room and punished for some time before they could force her to put on a dress, eat bread, and accept marriage to one of the plantation workers. She taught her granddaughter how to make birthing mats out of special plants and grow medicine. It doesn't matter what proportion of that woman's genes were from Taíno ancestors. She carried Taíno stories.

So my question is not how many of my chromosomes come out of the hills above Toa Alta, and before that, up the long island-hopping journey from the mouth of the Orinoco.

My question is this: What would it mean if we were to accept, as a nation, that we are all, one way or another, descended from real, living, Taíno people, as we are from the real, living people of dozens of African nations, the many ethnicities and little kingdoms that became Spain, and the assortment of other foreigners who washed up on our shores? That we are responsible to that indigenous ancestry, to their artistry and science, to their knowledge of the land, their respect for its trees, their grief and hope? What if, in the absence of proof, we just said yes, we are, among other things, an indigenous Caribbean nation, carriers of those stories.

Perhaps at other moments it might have meant other things, but right now, at this critical tipping point, to claim our indigenousness is to claim our place in the great hemispheric upheaval, the indigenous-led and -inspired insurgency that is making of Latin America the most hopeful place on earth.

A significant part of that hope is the implementation of policies that not only reclaim the continent's wealth for its people but draw upon the ecological expertise of its indigenous citizens to manage and protect those resources.

I don't know how many of the people who breathed the air of Boriken on that first day in 1493 belong in my family tree, or how many living descendants they have in today's far-flung Boricua diaspora. It doesn't matter. I am, like all of us, a child of that moment and privileged to live

in this one, and I am far less interested in who begat whom than I am in what we, the heirs to that collision, will make of our own plurinational future.

NOTE

1. In the context of a radical Latin American and Caribbean mestizaje, claiming my indigenous roots is part of my anti-imperialism. As an ally to indigenous people in the United States, where I live and work, I try to be thoughtful about where and when I name myself indigenous, making sure to honor the differences in our histories, as well as our kinship, and recognizing that I am also a settler, especially here in the north.

SPEAKING OF ANTISEMITISM

WHO AM I TO SPEAK?

I am a child of two oppressed peoples, a New York Puerto Rican mother, raised Catholic, and a New York Ukrainian Ashkenazi Jew, raised communist, the grandchild and great-grandchild of people displaced by war and economic hardship, the thread of my life descended through many generations that faced all the abuses humankind inflicts.[1]

I was born and grew up in rural Puerto Rico, where my radical parents survived the McCarthy years of blacklisting by growing vegetables on an abandoned coffee farm. I was born into a Latin American and Caribbean world dominated by military dictatorships, CIA coups, and US invasions. I have relatives in mass graves on three continents, and my African and indigenous dead weigh as heavily as my Jewish dead.

Who am I to speak? A colonial subject, a Woman of Color, an immigrant, disabled and chronically ill, of mixed class, with personal experience of both poverty and middle-class privilege, and a Jew. I am targeted by many oppressions, which has taught me to sift and compare, braid and unbraid them.

My father's family lived in a small southern Ukrainian village where, each spring, the Easter sermons sent their neighbors rampaging against the Jewish farmers and craftspeople who lived among them. For centuries Jews had been forbidden to own land, but in the early 1800s, as the

Russian Empire was pushing up against the Ottoman Turks, they started settling Jews and other people they didn't mind sacrificing on the newly conquered lands of southern Ukraine as a kind of buffer, in case the Turks pushed back. In 1807 my family climbed onto a wagon and drove south from the overcrowded northern city of Gomel to become part of that buffer in the brand-new agricultural settlement of Israelovka (Jew Town) in the province of Kherson. They were given farms, seeds, tools, and draft exemptions and ordered to grow wheat, which had to be sent to northern bakeries to provide bread. Jewish farmers could not travel without permission or pursue any other occupation until they had farmed as ordered for twenty years and gotten written permission from the authorities.

By the time my great-grandparents were born, in the 1880s, the draft exemption had been canceled and Jews did other kinds of work, but travel was still difficult. My great-grandfather Abraham, known as Pop, had to bribe a guard at a checkpoint to go to his job in a town where Jews were not allowed. Once, when a different guard was on duty, he was beaten instead and jailed. When war with Japan broke out in 1904, he left for the United States to avoid military conscription. Two years later his wife and my young grandmother followed with other relatives, so they were not in Israelovka when the Nazi Einsatzgruppen murdered several hundred Jews, including Pop's sister and brother, their spouses and their children, on a single day in May 1942.

One reason I say all this is because in the public discourses of antisemitism, losing relatives to the Nazis is often wielded as a kind of moral authority that exempts us from the challenge to think critically. I have been accused of betraying the Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis because, like the past six generations of my family, I believe our safety lies in the solidarity of working people, and not in a Zionist state. I have been accused of being a retroactive Nazi collaborator by people who claim that dead children accuse me. I am at peace with my ghosts. In none of my lineages do my ancestors demand that I build gated homelands. They say Protect all the people, cherish every land, build freedom for everyone.

But I am also saying that Jewish oppression is real, that it goes underground and emerges again like an indestructible weed, that this is its nature, to lie dormant, its roots intact beneath the ground, and when conditions are ripe, to burst up through the well-manicured lawns and do its job. That it does not need to be in rampant flaming flower to be a

threat. That my father was fearless as a communist, in spite of repression, because it brought him joy and hope and comradeship, because revolution really was his homeland. But he was frightened as a Jew. He was born in 1930 and was a child and teen during World War II, a highly politicized child who followed the details of the situation in Europe, who knew when his mother's village was destroyed, who wept with pride at news of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The horrors of the attempted genocide against European and some North African and Middle Eastern Jews didn't turn him inward, toward an exclusive concern with Jewish survival. It made it even clearer that human solidarity was the only force capable of dismantling such suffering—that we had to make it bigger, deeper, more comprehensive. Never for a moment did he consider joining or supporting a nationalist movement willing to take part in a colonial conquest and build into it privilege for Jews, constructing a state on the plunder of other people's lives.

I have not, in my lifetime, faced such an annihilating disaster as the extermination of a large part of European Jewry, although my lost cousins, the village that is gone, the thriving cultures I will never visit, are in my bones. But I know what antisemitism is for, that its purpose is to protect the Christian elites from the outrage of the oppressed by throwing Jews under the bus, by redirecting their rage toward Jews, and you never know when it will come in handy to someone. Like the Republicans in the New York State Senate who cut $500 million from the budget of City University of New York, slashing at the educational resources of working-class students who are overwhelmingly People of Color, because that's what they do, but saying it's because Jews need protection from antisemitism, because Jews are upset, that this is why capitalism is closing schools for working people, amplifying the Jew-blaming that was already in place, ready to flare up from ember into conflagration, and hiding the perpetrators behind a screen of smoke.

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The oppression of Jews as Jews, as a racialized people believed to possess inherited inferior or immoral traits that justify our mistreatment, is a thoroughly European Christian phenomenon and, as such, has been carried throughout the world as part of the conquering ideology of European

colonialism. It arrived in Puerto Rico with the Spanish, and a woman of my name was burned at the stake in 1520 under suspicion of being a secret Jew and desecrating a crucifix. It arrived in New York City long before my great-grandparents made their way through Ellis Island. It arrived in North Africa and the Middle East with the British, French, German, and Spanish colonizers and landed on people who had suffered Ottoman despotism and discrimination as non-Muslims but had by and large not been systematically singled out for persecution as Jews. It arrived as part of an arsenal of domination because it was every bit as useful as racism, but a lot sneakier.

Because I have sifted and compared my own experiences as a mixed-heritage Jew of Color, it's more than an intellectual exercise when I hold racism and anti-Jewish oppression, one in each hand, and weigh them, when I watch them move through the world, distorting the air around them, and recognize their behaviors, their camouflages. Racism is like a millstone, a crushing weight that relentlessly presses down on people intended to be a permanent underclass. Its purpose is to press profit from us, right to the edge of extermination and beyond. The oppression of Jews is a conjuring trick, a pressure valve, a shunt that redirects the rage of working people away from the 1 percent, a hidden mechanism, a set-up that works by misdirection, that uses privilege to hide the gears.

Unlike racism, at least some of its targets must be seen to prosper, must be well paid and highly visible. The goal is not to crush us; it's to have us available for crushing. Christian rulers use us to administer their power, to manage for them, and set us up in the window displays of capitalism for the next time the poor pick up stones to throw. What is hard for the angry multitudes to see is that Jews don't succeed *in spite of* our oppression. We are kept insecure by our history of sudden assaults, and some of us, a minority of us, are offered the uncertain bribes of privilege and protection. Privilege for a visible sample of us is the only way to make the whole tricky business work. Then, when the wrath of the most oppressed, whether Russian peasants starving on potatoes or urban US People of Color pressed to the wall, reaches boiling point, there we are: the tsar's tax collector, the shopkeeper and the pawnbroker, the landlord and the lawyer, the social worker and the school administrator. And whether it's a Polish aristocrat watching the torches go by on pogrom or the Episcopalian banker discreetly out of sight while working-class people tell each

other that Jews control the economy, the trick works. Agent of the rulers, scapegoat for their crimes. This was our history in Europe.

When European Jews began arriving in the United States in large numbers, none of us was considered white. We were poor tenement dwellers, and the demagogues of the day said we brought disease, immorality, crime, and sedition in our tattered pockets. But after World War II and the GI bill, with the slow end to anti-Jewish quotas and redlining, we got some traction and some of us began climbing right back into those middle-agent roles, buying the package of assimilation, which, this time, surely, would protect us and establish us firmly in the safe zone. So the digestible Jews began moving to suburbs and renting our old homes to the Great Migration and the Guagua Aerea, Black and Puerto Rican migrants filling the cities we had also landed in, my Puerto Rican grandmother entering the garment work my Jewish great-grandmother was just leaving.

And in order to be middle agents again, in order to be buffers between the ruling class and the poor and working classes, where most People of Color were concentrated, those Jews who could do so had to take on white identity. It was part of the job description. The ones who could, were offered the same old deal. The ones who could not, the ones who were too dark and foreign, became unimaginable as Jews and weren't offered anything. In the United States, the Jews in the display window are light of skin, assimilated, and have money.

WHAT I KNOW

I am not a student of Zionist history, not a scholar of Middle East colonialism, or the Nakba, or the evolution of the state of Israel, but I am an anti-imperialist Latin American, a colonial subject who understands what happened when the British decided that breaking up the Ottoman Empire would help them defeat the Germans in their bloody competition to own more of the world, when arrogant British officials put themselves in charge of those lands, and then promised them to Arab nationalists seeking independence, Zionist Jews seeking a territory, and the French, seeking control.

I am a native of an occupied colony being systematically stripped of everything that supports life, and I know exactly what I am looking at in Palestine. I too am a thirsty resident in a land of privatized water, of

massive land grabs, toxic waste disposal, a majority of my people unable to live in my country, citizen of a continent famous for invasions, occupations, death squads. I am familiar with the pornographic distortions of marketing through which oppression is sanitized, with shiny brochures that proclaim Puerto Rico to be paradise and Israel the home and hearth of freedom. I am a Latin American, so when I see soldiers shooting at children and calling them terrorists, I know what that is. I once wrote, "I am a colonial subject with a stone in my hand when I watch the news. I am a fierce Puerto Rican Jew holding out a rose to Palestine."

I am also a Jew who knows the deadliness of that middle-agent role. I recognize empire's habit of using proxies, understand and am enraged by the deathtrap that is built when the powerful protect their domination by bestowing guns and money and titles to expropriated land on marginalized and fearful colonizers who take up the whole hideous arsenal of Orientalist racism and embrace imperialist aspirations in the hope of finally becoming "real" Europeans.

Jews fleeing the hardships of Christian Europe could have built something quite different in a place with centuries of coexistence, could have come as respectful migrants, to be neighbors, not conquerors. But whatever it could have been, what we have now is this devastation, which, along with everything else, is also bloody reenactment: the grandchildren of ghettoized Jews patrol the borders of Gaza and build walls, descendants of pogrom survivors carry out collective punishments and random executions, and Jews privileged by what they have built speak of "dirty Arabs" in the exact same tone of voice in which the Christians of Europe said "dirty Jews."

ARGUMENTS AMONG JEWS

In my grandmother's village, there was a three-cornered argument about what, if anything, would save the Jews. The Orthodox said it was in God's hands. The Zionists said only Jews could be counted on to stand by Jews, and we needed a defensible territory of our own where we called the shots. The communists and socialists and anarchists who slipped in and out of the shtetls, handing out precious pamphlets to be passed around and hidden, said only an alliance of all the working people can dismantle our oppression and everyone else's. As a boy, my father took part in that

identical debate on the Boardwalk in Brooklyn. But after the Holocaust, after the Nazis destroyed so much of the world of European Jews, after the solidarity that existed was not enough, and the old Russian antisemitism that had been punished as a crime against socialism became a part of Soviet policy, after all that, the three-cornered debate went lopsided with despair, and now the Zionist minority of my father's childhood has grown to dominate all debate, aggressively silencing dissent.

The overwhelmingly US Jews who write to tell me that I should have died in a camp before living to denounce the crimes of Israel believe with all their hearts that their only possible safety in the world is a state where Jews dominate society and have protected privileges. They believe this is so essential to our survival as a people that we can't afford to consider the most basic human rights of Muslim and Christian Palestinians. They think that requiring accountability is an injustice to Jews, that it threatens our existence, that if we stop for a moment, the Holocaust will catch up with us, and therefore any means that will give Jews more control is justified, and anyone who disagrees wants us dead.

Some of the Jews who think this openly justify the horrific abuses required to hold such absolute power, spewing extreme racism and utterly dehumanizing non-Jewish Palestinians, demanding their expulsion and slaughter as a right. Some say violence has been forced on them by violence, that resistance is aggression, that the anger of dispossessed Palestine is rooted not in rage over colonialism but in hatred of Jews, and that all the armed paraphernalia of a brutal and brutalizing Israeli state is the necessary self-defense of innocent people simply occupying their ordinary privileges. That there was no Nakba, just voluntary departure by people who didn't happen to want to live in those villages under continual assault. They dig in stubbornly, claiming the right to an unthreatened existence they believe they have earned through suffering, while those they have displaced have not. It's the common narrative of people determined to do the wrong thing because they think the right thing will kill them.

Many more are in denial about the human cost of exclusive Jewish rule of a multireligious homeland (and Ashkenazi rule over Mizrahi and other African and Asian Jews), claiming that it's not as bad as people say, that, as usual, everyone is picking on the Jews, that other countries in the region treat people worse, that all countries start with invasions and slaughters and expropriated lands and it's unfair to criticize Israel for what every-

body does. After all, they say, the United States was founded on genocide against Native Americans, as if one bad history licenses another, as if the genocidal plot against indigenous North America was long over, and indigenous life some quaint fossil underfoot, and not in blazing resistance at Standing Rock, in Idle No More, in five hundred years of refusing to give up and die.

A lot of US Jews are deeply uneasy about Israel's treatment of Palestinians but believe the suppression of Palestinian society is an unfortunate necessity, or tell themselves, as many white people in the United States do, that atrocities are committed by a few bad apples in a basically sound barrel. These don't write to wish me dead. But they don't want me to speak. They think I have betrayed them by not being "even-handed," that a Jewish-dominated Israeli state is our best, our only shot at long-term survival, and any protest of, criticism of, or challenge to that state, if not an outright act of attempted genocide, is at least discriminatory, unfair, and gives aid to our enemies, always waiting to fall upon us once more. These are the people who proclaim antisemitism at any whisper of dissent. It's not exactly crying wolf because, unlike the fabled shepherd, they really do believe the wolf is there in the underbrush, but they cry it so often that when the real scapegoating nastiness takes place, no one believes it's there.

WHAT I WANT

I said I was not a student of Zionism, but I am a student of historical trauma, and I know that the cyclical nature of anti-Jewish oppression has proven over and over that the violent scapegoating of Jews can erupt in the midst of the most apparent security (Spain in the 1400s, Germany in the 1920s), that this fear is not unjustified, that it is not paranoia to think it could happen again. But I am also a student of how such trauma is recycled, reenacted, how the determination to prevent what has already happened, to never again be victims, justifies everything from domestic violence to wholesale slaughter. The oppression of European Jews, entangled with imperialist manipulation and profound racism, has created the nightmare, and I want all my peoples to be free of it. In the face of a widespread belief that domination is the most trustworthy answer to fear, I am fighting for both the freedom of Palestine and the souls of Jews.

I am a child of two traumatized tribes, and when I fight for justice in Palestine, when I reject the premise that criticism of Israeli crimes is antisemitic, I am not supporting a faraway people out of an abstract and benevolent idea of doing the right thing for someone else.

I am fighting for myself, a Puerto Rican Jew who does not exist within the American Dream of Jewish whiteness, the same dream of "real European" Jewishness that forced Mizrahi children into the equivalent of Native American boarding schools, to remake them, or stole them from their families and gave them away for adoption by Ashkenazi parents, and throws away the generously donated blood of Ethiopian Jews as "tainted" by their blackness.

I am fighting for an end to the recycling of pain. I am fighting for my own deepest source of hope, the belief in human solidarity, in our ability to decide that we will expand our hearts and our sense of kinship to include each other and resist the urge to contract in fear, to huddle and bare our teeth and lash out. When I speak out for the humanity of Palestine I am defending the humanity of everyone, including all Jews. When I stand firmly against the hidden reservoirs of antisemitism that bubble up when the ruling class needs them to, when I tell my gentile friends not to get distracted from the white Christian male 1 percent, to stay the course and stay clear, I am standing for accuracy, for clarity, for revealing the structures of domination that crush our world, including the people of Palestine.

When I keep saying that Israel's war against Palestinians only multiplies danger and pain for all of us, when I denounce and chant and recite and sing back against this injustice, when I say I will have no part of it and I am accused of denying Jews a future, I know that I am fighting for the only real future there is.

When I insist that we can be on each other's sides, that we can make sure everyone has enough allies to be safe, that this is the only work that matters, I am pushing back against despair, tipping my corner of that three-sided fight toward a justice big and beautiful enough for us all.

NOTE

1. The term "antisemitism" arose out of nineteenth-century racist pseudo-science. I choose to use it because of its widespread familiarity, but not to capitalize "semitic" as a made-up "race."

BDS AND ME

One night last year, my father and I sat in front of my laptop computer and watched, with many other members of Jewish Voice for Peace, as the Presbyterian Church voted to divest from three US companies who directly participate in and profit from the Israeli occupation, who make money from surveillance, repression, and the destruction of Palestinian homes and communities. The plan approved by the Presbyterian assembly also commits the Church to positive investments and active efforts toward reconciliation. It is the product of a ten-year process of soul searching, gathering information, and listening to other people about what we believe needs to happen. Jewish Voice for Peace, of which I am a proud member and on whose advisory board I sit, has played a powerful part in that process. I believe that acts like this one help to create a necessary moral crisis, in which business as usual becomes intolerable to larger and larger numbers of people.

Boycotts and divestment are honorable tools of moral persuasion through financial choice. The intensity of the pressure brought to bear on the Presbyterians by sectors of the Jewish community is not a measure of any actual harm being done to Jewish people. It's a measure of our collective vulnerability to fear-based policies.

All too often debates about Israel-Palestine are framed with only Jews at the center, and the Palestinian people disappear, become ab-

stract numbers, their suffering the price of what so many insist is Jewish survival.

In the letter that follows, written to the members of my local Presbyterian church, I do focus on the reactions of Jews to this vote, because one of the main pressures brought to bear on the Presbyterians has been the idea that divesting means they will lose their relationships with Jews, that Jews will feel betrayed and abandoned, and that these feelings matter more than basic human rights for Palestinians.

Dear Elders and Community of ——— Presbyterian Church

I am your Jewish neighbor here in _____ Square. I know that the recent vote to divest from three American companies that directly profit from the Israeli Occupation was very close, and that your denomination was deeply divided on this issue. I watched the last few hours of discussion and the vote itself live streamed from Detroit, and was moved by the obvious sincerity of all parties, and how earnestly each person reached for integrity.

I am writing to express my gratitude, as a Jew, for the brave decision to divest. There are those who will tell you that this decision abandons and betrays your Jewish friends. True friends hold out to one another the highest standards of moral behavior. Not to do so for fear of giving offense, that would be the true abandonment.

There are those who will tell you that your decision supports the enemies of the Jewish people and threatens our existence. While it is true that Israeli Jews are among those who suffer from political violence in Israel/Palestine, and that each and every life is precious, Jews are not in danger of extermination.

It is the continued policies of violent dispossession and repression that most endanger everyone's security, including Israeli Jews, increase the suffering and desperation of the Palestinian population, increase regional hostility toward Israel, and provide an excuse to justify real and dangerous antisemitism in the region and worldwide, and while Palestinians suffer the heaviest consequences of these policies, our long tradition of social justice, one of our most precious legacies, and one of the roots of our integrity, is also threatened.

There are those who will tell you that this decision is itself antisemitic. That anything but unconditional support for Israeli policies

means you are not committed to Jewish survival. They will tell you that Israel is justified by the horrific past to take any action it chooses in the name of self-defense, and any questioning of this right dishonors the memories of those who died at the hands of the Nazis.

In the early 20th century, my great-grandfather, Abraham Sakhnin, worked in a town forbidden to Jews. He had to bribe the Russian officer at the checkpoint in order to get to work each day. When a different soldier was on duty, he was arrested and beaten. The Ukrainian village he and his family lived in, and in which my grandmother was born, was destroyed in 1942 by invading German forces. Although my grandmother was in New York by then, her aunts, uncles and cousins were all killed on a single day. The Nazi plan was to rid the land of its Jewish and Slavic people, so it could be farmed by German settlers.

What dishonors my relatives is the fact of checkpoints in their names, of mass arrests, collective punishment, home demolitions, the theft of territory and resources, to rid the land of Palestinian people, so it can be farmed and built on by Israeli Jewish settlers.

I am one of many Jews who believe only justice will bring peace, and who face tremendous pressure and personal attacks for saying so. Today, my Jewish kin who believe repression is the price of survival are acting on old fears of standing alone against terrible threats.

By choosing divestment, by helping us to exert moral pressure for a just solution, by combining divestment with positive investment and the work of reconciliation, you are proving them wrong.

Thank you for being true friends.

PUERTO RICANS AND JEWS

1

Puerto Ricans and Jews, and those of us who are both, have a long and complex history, but unlike the history of Black-Jewish relations, there's been very little public discussion of our relationships. This is not a full accounting of that history. The story I'm telling here is my own and that of my families, the story of white Ashkenazi Jews and Puerto Rican Christians, mostly Catholic, in Puerto Rico and in New York City, the city with the highest concentration in the world of both my peoples.

It is a history that is bound up with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal, the persistent antisemitism of the Catholic Church, and the Inquisition's persecution of Converso Jews in the Americas. It is also a history of Iberian Jews entering, alongside Christians, into two of Europe's major projects of domination: the Atlantic slave trade and the ravaging of the indigenous Americas. And it is a history made in New York garment sweatshops filled first by Eastern European Jews and then by Puerto Ricans, in times of both solidarity and betrayal, when the price of upward mobility for white Jews was the abandonment of People of Color.

It is a story about the intertwining and confusion of ethnicity, racism, and class, about the assimilation of immigrant European Jews into the US system of white supremacy and their transition from not quite to fully

white. White supremacy exists solely to uphold the ongoing seizure, settlement, and extraction of wealth from indigenous lands, the intensive extraction of labor from Black people and other People of Color, and to prevent a united revolt of the dispossessed against the plundering of our lives. To acquire whiteness is, however unconsciously, to acquire complicity with those crimes, so it's a story of oppressed people seeking safety and becoming complicit in the danger of others, of the seepage of settler and slaveholder worldviews into the psyches and cultures of primarily poor and working-class Jews fleeing poverty and persecution. This is in no way unique to Jews. The structure of white supremacy in the United States shifts people in and out of racial categories for its own purposes, and assimilation into whiteness is a form of social control that has ensnared different groups at different times.

It's a story about the relatively small, local privileges and powers of landlord, shopkeeper, employer, school principal, and the neighborhood and municipal institutions where the most intimate cruelties of class enter the daily lives of the poor. Far from the boardrooms, private clubs, and conference centers where, out of the public eye, the policies that wreck our lives are set by white Christian men whose faces we don't see. It's the local faces of injustice we come to hate.

And it's a story of ancient, Jew-hating mythologies passed down in Puerto Rico through Catholic schools and parish priests, of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, written by the tsarist secret police to attack the Jewish left in Russia and resurrected in brown nationalist spaces, of the word-of-mouth misinformation about Jews that has my Boricua kin blaming the landlord, the boss, the resort developer, not just for acts of economic exploitation but for being a *Jewish* landlord, boss, or developer.

It is also the story of labor struggles fought together, of shared neighborhoods and prison cells, of schoolrooms, streets, and workplaces where Yiddish and Spanish mingled and were taken back into our homes, where thousands of Judorican marriages and babies were made. This essay is not all that history, only a suggestion of some places to look for it, some perspectives to take, an invitation to my peoples to do the work.

2

For Puerto Ricans, as for all Latin Americans, the eight centuries of relatively tolerant Muslim rule in southern Iberia, the Christian reconquest of the peninsula, and the subsequent violent persecution of both Muslims and Jews are a largely unexamined part of our inheritance. Steeped in mythologies of "pure" Spanish culture and blood, we were never taught how newly minted such a notion was in 1492, or how much the Spanish portion of our Latin American identities owes to the Muslim and Jewish civilizations of North Africa, the Middle East, and Southern Europe. A real assessment of the history of Puerto Rican–Jewish relations has to begin by examining the relationships already in place among Christian, Muslim, and Jewish residents of Iberia long before 1492. It must consider the Jews of North Africa, from Egypt to Morocco. It must take into account the Jewish seafaring merchants of Majorca, conquered by Aragon in 1344, and the school of mostly Jewish cartographers and cosmographers, now at the service of Christian aristocrats, whose maps, charts, and compasses made possible the seizure of the Canary Islands, in what became the dress rehearsal for both American genocides and plantation slavery.

European Jews have traditionally worked as craftspeople and tradespeople, shoemakers and seamstresses, small-scale merchants dealing in spices and wines, clothing and food, and, where it was permitted, farmers of vineyards, orchards, and other crops. In Eastern Europe, where my people lived, Jewish ownership of land was prohibited for centuries, and then permitted only to settle dangerous border regions and harness Jewish labor to grow wheat for the cities to the north. My people were farmers and garment workers.

Always and unpredictably at risk of violence and expulsion, European Jews gravitated toward the portable, toward movable assets, and, for those who could, toward occupations like medicine, translation, sciences, and arts, whose practitioners could beg favors from rulers. With our finances based primarily in crafts and trade rather than crop lands, Jews who could afford to dealt in credit, from local tradespeople selling goods to be paid for after the next harvest to wealthy merchant bankers who ransomed their communities by extending loans to kings and queens.

Iberian Jews had enjoyed relative serenity under Muslim rule, particularly under the earlier regimes. But the North African Almohads who

gained control of Muslim Iberia in the early twelfth century were zealots, bent on the purification of Islam. Their rule saw the only serious repression against Jewish and Christian communities. At the same time, antisemitism was on the rise in the Christian-controlled Gothic North. The First Crusade, passing through neighboring France in 1097, resulted in the deaths of thousands of French Jews, massacred as enemies of true religion. In 1182 the blood libel, the myth that Jews sacrificed Christian babies and used their blood to make Passover matzoh, appeared in the northeastern city of Zaragossa. Pogroms, violent riots against Jewish communities, often resulting in the murders of hundreds of Jews, erupted repeatedly in Iberia in times of economic hardship, plagues, and other calamities, and the smoldering class resentments of the poor were often directed not at the lords of the land but against Jewish merchants and tradespeople.

In 1348, following the appearance of the plague in Aragon, there were massacres of Jews in Zaragossa, Barcelona, and other Catalonian cities, which spread across Iberia. In 1391, at a time of economic crisis, a mob in Sevilla attacked the Jewish quarter, killing thousands. The pogrom spread to Cordoba, across Andalusia, and into the wool-producing cities of the North. There were anti-Jewish riots in Toledo, Madrid, Burgos, and Logroño. The Jewish quarters of Barcelona, Valencia, and Palma de Mallorca were looted, and tens of thousands of Jews died, with many more forced to convert or sold into slavery.

As Christian nobles retook parts of Spain long under Muslim rule, Jewish businesses were seen as rivals to the new enterprises of Christians. Fueled by long-standing religious intolerance, the expulsions and killings of Jews were often motivated by very direct economic gain. The stereotypes of Jews as unnaturally successful financiers, diabolically greedy and ruthless, stem in part from this competition. Many Jews were in fact poor, their trade consisting of small stores of nonperishable goods or craft work, making everything from buttons to shoes. Others were professionals—doctors, midwives, apothecaries, teachers, scientists, and artists employed by the middle classes and the wealthy and powerful. When the Jews were expelled, the newly forming Spanish state lost a huge number of skilled workers, physicians, artists, and scholars, and the skills and knowledge they took with them.

The Iberians who invaded and colonized the Taíno lands of the Caribbean included Jews who had converted to Christianity under threat, some

of whom continued to secretly practice Judaism. Jews from other places have continued to migrate to Puerto Rico over the centuries, and our migrations out of Puerto Rico have also led to the births of many Puerto Rican Jewish children, so that speaking of Puerto Ricans and Jews as two historically distinct peoples is inaccurate on many levels. From the first years of Europe's invasion of the Americas, there have been Puerto Rican Jews.

What Puerto Ricans inherit from this history is both a secret legacy of Jewishness and a public ignorance about the true place of Jews in Spanish and Latin American society; ancient prejudices and suspicions and a belief that Jews are especially exploitive and greedy. In sixth grade my English teacher, Miss Rivera, who had been trained at the Catholic teachers' college in Ponce, told our class that Jews get up every morning, spit on our money, and then count it. She had never, to her knowledge, met a Jew until my mother's angry note made her realize that one of her favorite students was one.

In Barrio Rubias of Yauco, where we went to school, the children called me and my brother *moros*, the Spanish name for Berber Muslims, because we were unbaptized, unaware of the irony of that centuries-old term being applied to us, and egged us on to desecrate homemade crosses so they could find out whether it was true that lightning would strike the child who did such a thing. They had no notion of what it meant to be Jewish, only that we were not Christians. When my parents first arrived in the early 1950s, the local Episcopal priest told his congregation that we were Diana worshippers.

3

The people who settled Puerto Rico from Spain in the early years of the colonization came from many parts of an Iberia just barely, and still tenuously, united under the domination of Castile and Leon. Although "New Christians," converted under duress from Judaism or Islam, were not supposed to enter the colonies, the colonies were far safer for them than Spain. But although many did manage to hide themselves in the Americas, and in Spain's African and Asian colonies, the Inquisition followed them.

In the 1520s a brother and sister of the surname Morales were denounced by the bishop of Puerto Rico for being suspected judaizers, converts who secretly continued to practice Judaism. In Catholic ideology, judaizers

were seen as more dangerous than open Jews because they were more liable to confuse and corrupt Christians. The Moraleses were accused of desecrating the cross, the same crime my friends egged me and my brother on to commit, in this case by hanging a crucifix on the wall and throwing things at it, which seems pointless, dangerous, and unlikely. They were tried and convicted. The sister was burned at the stake. The brother survived, only to die at the stake in Mexico in 1528.

Other survivors of the Inquisition took to the sea as pirates, robbing the authorized robbers of their loot, sometimes serving as navigators and crew alongside escaped West Africans.

Like any history in which secrecy was important to survival, investigating the presence of forcibly converted Jews, including those who secretly continued to practice their faith, is made extremely difficult by the need of early Puerto Rican Jews to hide their identities. Many converts took on the surnames of their sponsors, making it hard to find them with the usual tools of genealogy.

In the records of the Inquisition on Mallorca, certain surnames come up again and again in investigations meant to root out secret Jews, implying that at least some of the families were known to have originally been Jewish. Among them are familiar immigrant names like Arnau, Alberti, Coll, Moya, Corretjer, Bonet, Janer, Juliá, Alemañy, Barceló, Nadal, Martí, Andreu, Muñoz, Picó, Llorens, Lopez, Perez, and Torres. Less common but still familiar are Roig, Pelligrí, Ferrer, Prats, Domenech, Oliver, Soler, Noguera, and Pons. And these are only the names from Mallorca, not those from Andalucía, the origin of many early migrants to Puerto Rico and home to a large Jewish population.

In addition to those who came to the Caribbean directly, many Spanish Jews fled to Portugal, only to be expelled from that country a few years later. Portuguese Converso merchant families played a significant role in the transatlantic slave trade, as well as dealing in spices, fabrics, wine, and other goods. As Portugal became more and more dangerous for Jews, they scattered to places where they had existing business ties, in the Mediterranean and parts of the Caribbean. So common was the presence of Portuguese Jews in Caribbean commerce that *portugués* came to refer to Converso merchants.

Because the research has not been done, it's impossible to assess the real impact of open Jews, Conversos, and their Christian descendants on

Puerto Rican society. But any real understanding of contemporary relations between our peoples needs to begin with the deep roots of antisemitism in Spain and its American colonies and the participation of Iberian Jewish merchants, alongside Christians, in the crimes of that era.

4

There were never very many Jews in Puerto Rico, but when Puerto Ricans began arriving in New York City in significant numbers, there was a large Jewish community already in place, which, although it included Sephardic Jews like cigar worker Silvestre Breshman, in whose home Cuban and Puerto Rican patriots met, was overwhelmingly composed of Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews. In the early years of the century, most Jews had working-class occupations and lived in working-class immigrant neighborhoods. Their contacts with Puerto Ricans took place in cigar and garment workshops, in union meetings, and in the streets, buildings, and schools they shared.

But as many Jews became upwardly mobile and poor Puerto Ricans arrived in larger numbers from the island, Ashkenazi Jews were increasingly in positions of privilege in relation to Puerto Ricans: as landlords, schoolteachers, social workers, union officials, employers, neighborhood business owners, bank officers, lawyers, doctors, and small-scale lenders. In spite of the persistence of anti-Jewish quotas in education and discrimination in housing and some kinds of employment, significant numbers of Jews were gaining access to the middle class, while Puerto Ricans were not.

Jews were employing a traditional strategy of seeking class privilege as a shield against antisemitism, a choice that meant abandoning class-based alliances with non-Jews. Just as my northern Ukrainian Jewish ancestors were given land in southern Ukraine as a kind of living insulation against Turkish invasion, just as Eastern European Jews were employed to collect taxes from hungry Christian peasants who could have been potential allies against the aristocracy, so in the United States Jews were being offered the privileges of whiteness, with greater access to upward mobility, in exchange for abandoning alliances with other oppressed groups, particularly People of Color.

While some Jews accepted this option early on, many did not. During the first four decades of the twentieth century, many Jews were strongly active in a multiethnic labor movement and in feminist, anarchist, socialist, and communist organizing that prioritized identification with the poor and working classes across racial and cultural lines. While racism did affect the thinking of people in these movements, it is also true that they actively embraced antiracist causes, organizing against lynching and other racist violence, anti-immigrant bigotry, segregation, and discrimination of all kinds.

For example, the US Communist Party, to which my parents and my Jewish grandfather, aunts, and uncles belonged, was explicitly antiracist and provided one of the few opportunities for Black and white organizers and intellectuals to meet and talk politics. The Party generated and supported many interracial couples, including Puerto Rican labor leader and journalist César Andreu Iglesias and white Alabama organizer Jane Speed, both significant figures in the history of the Puerto Rican left.

In 1933 Rose Pesotta, a leading organizer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and herself a Jewish immigrant from Russia, spent months organizing Mexican women garment workers in Los Angeles. Her preconceptions were stereotyped; she assumed that Mexican women would be passive, intimidated by the sexism of Mexican men, and therefore hard to organize. While she did face difficulties, they were not as great as expected, and her campaign had some significant successes. She came to rely on Mexican women as the backbone of her West Coast organizing and took the male leadership down to the local jails so they could hear the spirit with which the *mexicanas* sang from their cells.

The following year she went to Puerto Rico to organize women garment workers there. The meetings were full, although women often fainted from hunger while she spoke. She began bringing baskets of food to meetings and would ask if anyone had not eaten before she spoke. She was deeply moved by the circumstances of Puerto Rican women workers and continued to speak about their living and working conditions for many years. In 1944 she wrote several articles about poverty and working conditions in Puerto Rico for New York newspapers.

The history of New York Jewish and Puerto Rican activism is full of personal and political relationships between our communities. Puerto Rican writer and organizer Jesus Colón, whose second wife, Clara, was Jewish, lived next door to my aunt, Eva Levins, and both were active in the Communist Party. In 1943, one month after Jewish partisans in the Warsaw Ghetto rose up against the Nazis and managed to drive them from the ghetto, Colón wrote a column in the Spanish-language newspaper *El Diario* criticizing antisemitism in the Latino community.

My own parents also met through the Communist Party. My father's Jewish family had come at the turn of the century from Ukraine. Their reasons were both economic and political. Russia was drafting Jewish men to fight Japan, and pogroms were on the rise. The majority of my Jewish relatives were garment workers.

My mother's Puerto Rican parents arrived in New York in 1929, and my grandmother also did garment work, while my grandfather worked as a janitor and stock clerk until he was recruited into the electricians union apprenticeship program during World War II. Growing up surrounded, and bullied by, Irish and Italian Catholics, my mother gravitated toward the Eastern European Jews who were also targets and who became her friends and allies. It's worth mentioning that while my mother was raised working class and my father's family became middle class during his childhood, it was my mother's people who came from small town landed gentry, and my father's who were peasant farmers.

In 1950 Puerto Rican nationalist Rosa Collazo and Jewish communist Ethel Rosenberg met in prison. Collazo writes about their conversations in the "living room" area near their cells. While Ethel knitted sweaters for her sons, they speculated on whose case was more serious, which of them, the communist Jew or the Puerto Rican nationalist, was more likely to be executed. Collazo writes that a Jewish grocer in her neighborhood extended credit to her family while she and her husband were in jail. These anecdotal encounters show that in spite of class tensions, racism, and antisemitism, Jews and Puerto Ricans found common ground in shared struggles that went beyond survival and created Puerto Rican Jewish families like my own.

6

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, as the impacts of the Holocaust, the McCarthy persecutions, and the establishment of the state of Israel made themselves felt, many formerly liberal and even progressive Jews retreated politically and sought security in upward mobility and conventional professional lives, and this conventionality included varying degrees of acceptance of economic injustice and racism. My father described a massive political and cultural shift in his Brooklyn neighborhood, with vibrant Yiddish theater, periodicals, and cultural events giving way to intense assimilation, and the prewar and wartime options for girls narrowing to the pursuit of popularity and upwardly mobile marriages.

Meanwhile Puerto Ricans were arriving from the island in record numbers, most of them poor and working class, moving into the same economic slots, and often the same neighborhoods, that Jews had been moving out of. Puerto Rican women became sweatshop workers in a garment industry where Jews were now among the managers and even owners. The bureaucracy of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was largely made up of white Jewish men, now responsible for representing the interests of Puerto Rican women workers. Jews had won some access to education, even though quotas limited the numbers of Jewish students at universities well into the late 1960s, and many had become public school teachers. Some played extremely important roles in democratizing the school curricula, pushing for multicultural content and responsiveness to community needs. Others resisted, resenting the demands of the new immigrant population for community control and bilingual education.

Most Puerto Ricans coming from the island had little direct experience of Jews and plenty of exposure to the antisemitism of the Catholic Church. Their experiences of class differences and racism made it easy to accept antisemitic stereotyping of Jews as greedy, rich, and in control—and white. The existence of Jews of Color was as unrecognized by Christian Puerto Rican migrants as it was by white Jews and by the rest of US society.

Other immigrant groups that had also acquired both class privilege and whiteness had power in the barrio, including the Italians and the Irish. But on the one hand, the perception that Jews were not securely privileged and did in fact share some common interests with People of Color led to

higher expectations and a greater degree of disappointment when Jews behaved opportunistically; on the other hand, antisemitism made it easy to identify class inequities and racism as specific problems of Jewishness.

7

As the solidarity movement with Palestine has grown in size and impact, activists of color are increasingly identifying with the Palestinian struggle for sovereignty, noting the similarities in our experiences of racism, occupation, and police violence and the increasing militarization of law enforcement. The technologies and strategies developed by the Israeli state during seventy years of repression against the Palestinian people are being exported through trainings of police departments in US cities and in countries like Guatemala, which uses Israeli aid to wage genocidal war on its indigenous population.

White Ashkenazi-dominated US Jewish communities and institutions have largely failed to take firm stands against the intense racism and colonialism of Israeli society, in many cases insisting that Jewish support for antiracist organizing by People of Color must be conditional on our keeping quiet about Palestine, and this has eroded and obscured some of the potential for powerful alliances. The refusal of major Jewish institutions to support the platform of the Movement for Black Lives because of a one-line reference to genocidal Israeli state violence directed at Palestinians is emblematic not only of a refusal to face the brutal realities of Palestinian life under Israeli domination but also of a profoundly racist disrespect for the historical significance and power of such a declaration, created by fifty different Black organizations over the course of a year of deep discussion and for the absolute right of self-determination of Black leaders.[1]

It has become more and more common for Zionist Jews to attack People of Color organizations with accusations of antisemitism for supporting Palestinian sovereignty or excluding Zionist propaganda from their events, as was the case at the 2017 Chicago Pride march. The dominance of Zionism in US Jewish institutional life and the practice of holding People of Color causes hostage in this way means a significant number of white Jews prioritize unconditional support for a state that is committing crimes against the human rights of People of Color over life-and-death antiracist struggles on their doorsteps.

Non-Jewish Puerto Ricans and white Jews in New York have long-standing alliances in the labor movement, civil rights work, and battles for accessible health care and accountable higher education, and some Puerto Rican activists and community leaders are reluctant to rock the boat by talking about Palestine. But many younger activists are joining coalitions with Palestinians and see obvious parallels between Puerto Rican and Palestinian conditions and movements. White progressives in the United States, including white Jewish progressives, need to be unconditionally and actively antiracist and committed to economic justice, whatever the focus of their activism, and Puerto Rican leaders and activists need to expect this from our white Jewish friends, allies, and families.

Puerto Rico itself is under a ferocious assault by predatory Wall Street investment brokers, whose representatives have been appointed to a junta with power over the island's entire economic and political system and have imposed austerity measures that include layoffs and wage cuts, massive privatization, and slashed budgets for health care and education. This process of plunder has only intensified since Hurricane Maria devastated the archipelago in 2017. The fact that several of the predatory funds are owned by Jews doesn't make it a special Jewish responsibility to support Puerto Rican resistance to this attack, any more than the participation of Protestants makes it a Protestant problem, but progressive people in the United States do have a responsibility to take a stand against this escalation of extraction from a direct US colony, over half the population of which has been forced to migrate to the US. We need a strong solidarity movement that takes on the colonial domination of our homeland and the exploitation and marginalization of our diaspora communities; we need our Jewish friends, allies, and relatives to be part of it; and we need that movement to oppose colonialism, racism, and militarization wherever it takes place, including Israel-Palestine.

As I wrote earlier in this book, I understand how traumatic history has led so many Jews to put all their eggs in the Israel basket, but it's a basket built on demolished villages, uprooted olive groves, and thousands upon thousands of dead or imprisoned Palestinians, a basket woven to imitate earlier brutal, European colonial regimes, and it's both unreliable and reprehensible. What's more, it asks for far too little on behalf of Jews. We have been bombarded with the message that the best we can hope for is an embattled fortress, bristling with weapons, so unjust that only

massive repression can maintain it, a state founded on principles of white supremacy, directed not only at Palestinian Muslims and Christians but also against Middle Eastern, North African, and Ethiopian Jews. Palestinians and other oppressed people in Israel-Palestine must have freedom, self-determination, and justice, but Jews also deserve a better vision of what it means to be sovereign and safe. The traumatic history of European Christian persecutions of Jews is only one strand of our past. We also have centuries of peaceful coexistence in many places, including parts of Europe, but especially in North Africa and the Middle East, where we have a long and rich history of alliances for the common good.

Puerto Ricans also have traumatic stories, histories of genocide against our indigenous ancestors, of slavery and indenture, military occupation and human experimentation, mass sterilization, and forced migration, and we have been inundated with fables about our weakness and passivity, about the futility of pursuing independence, that nobody cares, that we are insignificant and disposable. And we have resisted with tremendous courage, persistence, and creativity, quite often with the help of dedicated allies, for 525 years. The inheritance of antisemitism, the myths of Jewish dominance and Jewish greed, and belief in a special Jewish kind of racism, all serve to distract us from the real power structures that are at war with our lives. They are part of the mechanisms of disempowerment inflicted on us. When we uproot them, we will be able to see more clearly who actually holds power and how.

For both my peoples, building strong, principled alliances and holding to the biggest possible visions of liberation are what most powerfully push back against the historical lies we've been told about ourselves and each other.

Today relations between white Ashkenazi Jews and non-Jewish Puerto Ricans are primarily defined by the different ways we have been impacted by white supremacy and class. This is not 1490s Spain or 1520s Puerto Rico. Antisemitism among Puerto Ricans exists but has no power base and, I believe, would give way fairly easily to widespread and effective Jewish organizing against economic and racial injustice, with a strong component of internal work in Jewish communities and institutions to examine and challenge Jewish participation in both.

This process will be best led by Jews of Color. The recent emergence of local and national organizing by alliances of Jews of Color and Mizrahi

and Sephardi Jews is extremely hopeful for the future of all our peoples. We have the most sophisticated and grounded understanding of how white supremacy and antisemitism interact and how they manifest in our communities. Those of us who oppose Zionism understand how its racist assumptions also affect us and that when we engage in alliances with Palestinians, it's from a broader understanding of how racism and settler colonialism in the United States and Palestine are related. For us, there's no separation between antiracist work for Black and Brown lives in the United States and for Palestinian lives. We know the police and soldiers who shoot our friends and families train together and exchange tips. We know the weapons dropped on Gaza were tested in Vieques. Our multiple histories highlight the connections between white supremacy and state violence in the Bronx and Gaza City, between settler colonial land grabs in the Dakotas, Puerto Rico, Amazonia, and Palestine.

In fact, our existence itself challenges the permanent victim narratives of Zionism in which Arabs are the opposite of Jews, because our alliances are full of Arab Jews, Palestinian Jews, Jews whose families flourished under Arab rulers. Our existence also challenges the myth that the history and cultures of white European Jews define Jewishness, that whiteness and Jewishness are inextricably linked. In fact we challenge it so profoundly that our existence provokes incredulity, confusion, and outright denial.

We also challenge the myth that People of Color are never Jews. That Christianity defines Puerto Rican experience. That Puerto Ricans are Catholics, Pentecostals, espiritistas, or santeras, but never Jewish. We know that Catholic dominance in Puerto Rico was brought on the hilt of a sword, that our Taíno ancestors were hanged in honor of the apostles while our Jewish ancestors burned at the stake and our African ancestors were put to death as devil worshippers. I understand how Christianity so successfully imposed itself in Puerto Rico, why indigenous and African religions hid under the robes of saints, how churches offered solace if not sanctuary, how people have found strength for resistance in their faith. And Christian domination in the Americas was also a matter of blood and suffering, enslavement and torture, a legacy we have not, as a people, faced up to. Puerto Rican Jews, in alliance with Black Puerto Ricans, Muslim Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Ricans claiming and lifting up our indigenous heritage can lead this work as well.

Only when we fully and honestly examine our histories and the power dynamics we have inherited from them can we truly decide to throw our lot in with each other, not for the short term but for the widest possible vision of a liberated future.

NOTE

1. I am proud to say that at my synagogue, Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont, California, our spiritual leaders chose to chant portions of the platform as sacred text during 2016 High Holy Days services.

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CLASS, PRIVILEGE, AND LOSS

Privilege is both real and unreal. Certainly people live and die because of differences in access to real resources. At the same time, most of what the privileged think they are getting is illusory. Much of the pursuit of privilege is based on a misconception about what constitutes security. It is based on acquiring material and cultural resources that are denied to others while surrendering integrity, awareness, and most of our potential relationships. Ultimately privilege is a raw deal, and conquest isn't all it's cracked up to be.

The acquisition of whiteness in the United States by various European immigrant groups who were discriminated against and colonized within Europe—for example the Irish, the Italians, and the Ashkenazi Jews—was such an exchange.

In order to access upward class mobility, these groups were required to surrender vibrant relationships of solidarity with indigenous communities and communities of color, particularly African Americans, betray friends and neighbors, and accept the mistreatment of those people as being in some way justified. Because of the very insecurity of the privileges offered, these groups were persuaded to narrow their circle of self-interest and accept the exclusion of People of Color. White, class-privileged US feminists did the same in pursuit of suffrage, sacrificing the

liberation of African American women, newly immigrant women, poor and illiterate women for the limited rewards of electoral participation.

But even for the most privileged, the heterosexual English Protestant male elites who arrived already loaded with unearned wealth and power, privilege robbed them of a universe of possibilities and gave them only domination and luxury in exchange.

For a long time, I've been curious about what induces people who have it to see through privilege and recognize how much of a better deal it is to join forces with everyone else to dismantle the entire system of privileges and hierarchies. The benefits of privilege do include more reliable access to the basic necessities of life, but most of the so-called benefits are liabilities when it comes to the survival of the human species. I've never met anyone who was transformed by guilt. What transforms is the recognition of humanity in those we were taught to diminish and the realization that in denying them, our own humanity is at stake.

Privilege replaces relationships with things, community with isolated, "exclusive" privacy. In the airline catalogues of knickknacks you can buy right from your seat, there are machines to rub your neck, rotating pet dishes that will feed your cat during your absence, and, my favorite, a Styrofoam man marketed to single women, available in two skin colors, with or without legs depending on where you will display him, so that prowlers will not think you are alone. It even comes in a discreet carrying case. Every one of these products is designed to make it unnecessary to have human contact, to ask anyone for help, to have relationships of mutual support. These are the accessories of the cult of individual achievement, dysfunctional but logical.

The illusion for middle-class people is that the relatively thin and debt-ridden slice of pie we get is worth all the sacrifices. We must pretend that we have arrived, that we have achieved the sum of our desires, that we are secure. But huge as the differences are to those involved, the gap between $30,000 a year and $80,000 is much smaller than the gap between $80,000 and the wealth of the really wealthy. The level of upward mobility available to most of us is meaningless compared with real redistribution. There are people who get paid hundreds of millions of dollars a year in this country, and that's "earned" income, not the wealth that just sits around multiplying for its owners. Part of stripping away the illusions of middle-class privilege is looking at real numbers. Naming exactly

what we have and where it came from is taboo. Guilt, shame, embarrassment, fear of the envy of others, fear that it isn't really enough and we will be exposed, fear that it's too much and we'll be found out, the notion that it's bad manners not to *have* privilege but to talk about it—the pull to hide concrete information about money and access is very strong. And it can be incredibly liberating for us to do so, not only about ourselves but about our parents as well. To say my father earned $6,000 a year in rural Puerto Rico in 1965 and hear that someone else's father made $70,000 the same year while my best friend's family of ten lived on $800.

Privilege is systemic, built on the large-scale choices of many people over long periods of time and hardened into social structures, and we have a very limited ability to opt out of any of it. At the same time, we have choices about how we understand our privileges and what we do with them. We aren't taught how to be accountable to the larger whole, or take responsibility for the choices our ancestors made that we have inherited as more than our share of access.

My grandfather literally worked himself to death at the age of forty-six to get his wife and sons into the middle class. Upward mobility was the heroic effort of working-class people to find personal solutions for huge economic disparities. It's one of those compromises with the overwhelming reality of oppression that seems like the only option and costs much more than we think.

Systems of privilege are built on fear of scarcity, an insatiable hunger for more wealth, more power, more imaginary guarantees, and they depend on the ability of the privileged to ignore the huge social consequences of inequality, to dehumanize or ignore the people destroyed by the pursuit of excess. They are built on the belief that no one else will look out for us, that narrow self-interest is just common sense, that social equality and reciprocity will impoverish rather than enrich our lives.

Taking responsibility for our place in the social relations of power doesn't mean volunteering to go under. It means dedicating ourselves and our resources to unmaking the structures of inequality, jumping from the burning building of piracy into a net held by many hands.

When I say that privilege has a cost, I am often met with outrage. Sometimes the anger of the oppressed has no room to acknowledge this. But if privilege is really the best thing out there, if there are no drawbacks to having it, if no one in their right mind would exchange it for community,

then what on Earth do we think we're doing? To expose the fraudulent promises of privilege also frees us from the part of our anger that is envy. In no way does it deny that it is better to eat than to starve. It simply says that to eat abundantly when others are hungry is toxic.

We can't surrender whiteness or maleness, heterosexuality, or the reality of having been born into money, but we can dismantle the lies we have been taught about what those things mean, consciously build relationships of equality and respect with people who are not privileged where we are, assume they know more about that piece of the social landscape than we do, and learn from them. How to acknowledge the injury privilege does to those who have it as well as those who lack it, how to make it clear, to ourselves and to those who have what we do not, that relying on each other instead of our unearned extras is ultimately joyful and deeply rewarding, that the real losses happened long ago, when the privilege was accepted—these are fundamental questions for a much needed theory of solidarity, of how to reweave the torn fabric of our interdependence.

NADIE LA TIENE

Land, Ecology, and Nationalism

¿Puedes venderme tierra, la profunda
noche de raices; dientes de
dinosaurios y la cal
dispersa de lejanos esqueletos?
¿Puedes venderme selvas ya sepultadas, aves muertas,
peces de piedra, azufre
de los volcanes, mil millones de años
en espiral subiendo? ¿Puedes
venderme tierra, puedes
venderme tierra, puedes?
La tierra tuya es mía.
Todos los pies la pisan.
Nadie la tiene, nadie.

Can you sell me the earth, the deep night
of roots, dinosaur teeth and the scattered lime
of distant skeletons?
Can you sell me long buried jungles, dead birds,
fishes of stone, volcanic sulfur, a thousand
million years rising in a spiral? Can you
sell me land, can you
sell me land, can you?
The land that is yours is mine.
Everyone's feet walk it.
No one has it, no one.

—AFROCUBAN POET NICOLÁS GUILLÉN, FROM *¿PUEDES?*

1

Spring 1995. I sit on the shoulder of our family mountain, one of the highest in this part of the Cordillera Central of western Puerto Rico, in the pine forest that rises like a Mohawk haircut off the smooth deforested slope to the east, a profile easy to recognize from miles away. Sitting on the slippery reddish needles in a green shade, I look out between the straight trunks of Honduran pine over rolling miles of cleared land planted in bananas,

coffee, and oranges and drenched alternately in full tropical sunlight and the quick-moving rain showers of the season. Each time my brother, Ricardo, or I return to this farm where we spent the most important years of our childhoods, we make pilgrimage to this exact place where, after the fire in the early 1960s, the forestry service paid us to plant pine seedlings. They wanted to start a small timber seed industry, and our farm became part of the test acreage. In fact it was Lencho who planted the trees, not us. Hundreds of seedlings in black plastic bags spaded into the blackened hillside. Lencho had been doing odds and ends of agricultural and other work for our family for several years. In the midst of the Korean War my communist parents called the land Finca la Paz, "Peace Farm," but Lencho called it Monte Bravo—"Fierce Mountain."

In 1966 my father was denied tenure at the University of Puerto Rico, where he had been teaching biology. As a professor he had been an active participant in the 1965 student protests against the war, and it was his unpaid teaching of Marxism and organizing, his trip to Cuba the previous winter, his egalitarian and innovative way of teaching biology in a stodgy department that lost him his job. Because he was in essence blacklisted from teaching on the island, because of my approaching adolescence in a rural community with inadequate education and a high rate of pregnancy among my friends, because my mother wanted to go back to school, my father accepted a job in Chicago and we moved there.

The day we left, the pine trees were still spindly, seven-foot saplings, but somehow the knowledge of how they grew without us, how the farm continued to flower and decay, sustained my brother and me. The memory of it, the smells and sounds and colors, was one buoyant piece of driftwood in the shipwreck of our intense culture shock. We sent our spirits there for imaginary refuge from the harshness of our new lives and invoked it at night so we could sleep among the alien noises of Chicago. Every night for years I dreamed of walking up the path into the farm.

Now we return to it as if checking on a buried treasure. Our ownership of these thirty-four acres preserves the land from clear-cutting, and the fact of that ownership is balm for exile. The colonial economy, the lack of the kind of social and political community we now need, the structures of our personal lives all keep us from coming here to live, but we need the knowledge of that deep valley full of rain, protected from bulldozers. Ownership is a foothold in a slippery place of identity and longing, of necessity and choice.

From my bedroom thousands of miles from here, this piece of earth and the land stretching out around it become a kind of amulet against dispossession. I imagine the rain falling on it, the hawks circling above it, the lizards skittering across it like a chorus of affirmation that I am rooted. That in spite of generations of shifting nationality and loss behind me, in spite of the unpredictably changing jobs, relationships, rented houses, I have a home on Earth. The land makes me safe.

But whenever I sit here listening to the wind in the trees, the haunting cry of lizard cuckoos in the valley proclaiming the coming downpour, smell the sunbaked ferns and decaying banana leaves, and feel the dense clay under me, the symbolism begins to unravel. Slowly, as I listen to it, the land becomes itself again. Not mine, not anyone's. Talking to me, yes, but not any more than it talks to the fire ants building their nests or the bats' bones becoming humus or the endlessly chirping reinitas twittering among the señorita flowers.

2

I am an ecologist's daughter. I grew up in a house where the permeable boundaries of other worlds crisscrossed our own. At night you could hear the termites munching inside the walls and the slow trickling grains of digested wood. Rats ran in the attics, and if we ventured into the kitchen after hours they stared offended at our intrusions. Lizards hunted daily on the glass fields of our windowpanes, stalking moths and wasps, and hummingbirds, momentarily stunned from crashing into those windows, would lie in our hands, then shoot back into the hibiscus bushes. Around the ripening bunch of bananas that hung from the kitchen ceiling, clouds of fruit flies rose each time we pulled off a piece of fruit. On autumn evenings of rain, a single tree frog would sing from the moist crevices under the sink. In my parents' bedroom, a long tendril of jasmine that had crept between roof and wall wound sinuously across their shelves of paperbacks. It was never our house.

My father would take me walking sometimes, show me the last fading scar of the old road, the Camino Real, poke into the holes of rotten tree trunks, peer into the cups of flowers to see the teeming insect life. I grew up in a place where a tree might fall and within a week, new seedlings sprang from the dead wood. The mountain slid and shifted under the

heavy autumn rainfall; the garden left untended grew lush and tangled overnight, and it was never the same place for long. How can you own something that changes under your hands, that is so fully alive? Ecology undermines ownership.

3

My parents bought this farm in 1951 for $4,000. It was ninety acres of abandoned coffee plantation that had fallen back into wilderness after the coffee market crash of 1898, the hurricanes of 1899 and 1928, and the economic devastation of the 1930s and 1940s. Next to the house I grew up in were the ruins of cement washing tanks and a wide drying platform where we rode our bikes: the last remaining evidence of the coffee boom of the past century, when immigrants from Corsica and Mallorca and refugees from the Haitian Revolution carved up the mountains into landholdings and turned the subsistence farmers, who had for centuries cultivated where they pleased, into landless laborers. Climate, soil, expertise, and work combined to produce the best coffee in the world for wealthy patrons in Paris, Vienna, and New York.

When my parents bought it, the coffee had gone wiry, wild ginger choked the pathways, and bitter orange, grapefruit, and bananas flowered untended under the imported shade trees, brought in to protect the precious crop. My father, unabashedly speaking Brooklyn high school Latin, would stand at the counter of the tiny roadside colmado drinking beers with the coffee workers until he had enough Spanish to talk politics and begin organizing. My mother used the Agricultural Extension Club to get women out of their houses and learning about leadership and organization at the same time that they learned how to sew and make lard cans into stovetop ovens. After a couple of years my parents sold off half the land at prices the landless or nearly so could afford, and for decades people would come around trying to buy land from the Americano who didn't know better. But how else do communists own land?

They raised chickens and the vegetables my father peddled from their battered red truck. He worked as a lab tech at the hospital in Castañer and taught in San German while my mother took science courses, farmed, raised me and my brother, washed all the diapers and sheets and work pants by hand, cooked, cleaned, and tended the machete wounds and

cooking burns of the neighbors at the first aid station. The week my parents married the Korean War had broken out. They had come to Puerto Rico uncertain what the consequences would be. But he was declared unfit for service, and they stayed, raised children, made a life, and loved the land for its beauty and peace.

4

For my ancestors, land had different potency. When Eusebio Morales died in 1802, the lands that were measured for division among his heirs stretched between landmarks like "the old ceiba on the slope above the river." But what lay between those markers was money. Money extracted from the land by slave labor and the so-called free labor of the landless. They grew coffee and tobacco, sugar cane and rice, and raised cattle. Land and slavery stood behind the petition of Eusebio's grandson Braulio to found a new town, behind the club of wealthy men who rotated among themselves the offices of mayor and militia captain, marrying their children to each other so obsessively that I am descended from the same patriarch by six different lines of descent.

Land and slaveholding still stood behind my grandfather in the Depression. When he worked as a janitor and then as a stock clerk in a New York City public school cafeteria. When he fed his family on food the supervisor pretended not to notice he was taking home. It was there in his certainty of his own rightness, in the phrase "por lo derecho," which meant that he lived righteously, with dignity and correctness, not like all those wrong-living títeres that surrounded them in Harlem.

My grandmother Lola expressed that pitying sense of superiority even more overtly than my grandfather. She would speak of some African American neighbor who was "so nice, poor thing." Although she complained that the Moraleses thought her not good enough, her own ancestors had all taken their turns administering class power. It was the service of her ancestors the Díaz brothers leading a company of militia against the English invasion of 1797 for which her family was rewarded with lands in Barrio Anones. Although her father had gambled away the family store and she did garment work in New York, although she distanced herself from her relatives and liked the bustling anonymity of New York, she still wore her buena familia like an especially nice perfume and was sorry for

those who didn't have it, until at the end of her life it became a weapon against the staff of one nursing home after another, where she reduced the dark-skinned, working-class nurses' aides to angry tears.

5

My great-grandfather Abraham Sakhnin also grew up on a farm his family owned. This was in southern Ukraine, up the railroad line from Odessa. In his old age he painted his memories of it: the horses, the cellars full of pumpkins, the harvesting of wheat. The Sakhnins had come from Lithuania in the days of Tsar Nicholas I, when Jews were promised draft exemption if they settled on the borders as a buffer against the Turks. They were given land and taught to farm it by German settlers imported for the task. For five generations they did so. But land, for Jews, in Eastern Europe, was not the foundation it was for Catholic hacendados in Puerto Rico. My great-grandfather fled the farm in 1904 rather than fight in the war against Japan. Pogroms were on the rise along with revolutionary violence, and although the family were Bolshevik sympathizers and some stayed to take part in the Revolution, Abe left for Canada and then New York, his first cousin Alter went to Buenos Aires, and his sister married and left for Siberia. In 1942 the Jewish residents of the settlement, known as Yazer, were slaughtered by Nazis. Land was no guarantee.

6

Land is no guarantee, but in the myth-making of exiled and dispossessed nationalisms it becomes a powerful legitimizing force. The central symbol of Puerto Rican nationalism, the phrase most often used to mean that which is struggled for, is Madre Patria, usually translated as "Mother Homeland." Just as the enthusiastic propagandists of the 1898 US invasion feminized and sexualized the land, describing "her" as well endowed, fruitful, and docile, a young girl who "surrenders herself graciously to our virile marines," so too the nationalists have portrayed the colonized country as a captive woman, "la madre tendida en el lecho" (the mother laid out on the bed) in the hands of foreigners who rape her.

The idea of patria is deeply rooted, like patriotism itself, in both patriarchy and its raison d'etre, patrimony—the inheritance passed from father

to son. And the basis of that inheritance is land. Under the rhetoric of Madre Patria lies that which is most despised and exploited in practice, most ignored in nationalist programs, most silently relied on as the foundation of prosperity for the future republic, the basis for its industrial development and for a homegrown class of owners. The unpaid and underpaid labor of women, the labor of agricultural workers, and the generous and living land itself, these, in nationalist rhetoric, become purely symbolic sentimental images, detached from their own reality.

Nationalism has tremendous power. It mobilizes just rage about colonial oppression toward a single end. It subordinates all other agendas to that end. It silences internal contradictions among the colonized, postpones indefinitely the discussion of gender, sexuality, class, and often "race," endowing nationalist movements with a kind of focused, single-minded passion capable of great force. But although that force draws its energy from the real pain and rage and hope of the colonized, nationalism does not attempt to end all forms of injustice. Nationalism is generally, both in the intent of its leaders and in its results, a one-point program to capture patrimony for a new group of patriarchs.

7

In nationalist rhetoric, land does not move. No wonder it is so often portrayed as a mother. Eternal, loyal, and patient, it waits for its exiled children to come home. It would know them anywhere. But the real land, made of soil and rocks and vegetation, is never still. In the United States the average acre of land loses five tons of soil every year, blown by wind across property lines and fences, municipalities and national borders, washed by rain into river systems that drain a thousand miles downstream. Even massive shapes like the Grand Canyon shift and collapse and move continually. Each autumn in Puerto Rico the water running off our mountain turned a heavy orange and flowed away downhill, leaving the silt of our property spread over hundreds of square kilometers of flatlands and leagues of sea.

This fact has occasionally been used as part of imperial reasoning. In the late nineteenth century, one US statesman claimed that Cuba was naturally theirs because it must have been formed by mud washing out of the mouth of the Mississippi. It was literally US soil. But "national soil"

is a nonsensical idea. Places have history, but soil does not have nationality. Just as the air we breathe has been breathed by millions of others first and will go on to be breathed by millions more; just as water falls, travels, evaporates, circulates moisture around the planet—so the land itself migrates. The homeland to which Jews claim to have returned (land of the Canaanites before them and many others since) is not the same land. The earth that lay around the Temple could be anywhere by now. So what exactly is it we've been dreaming of for so long?

8

Land and blood. Mystical powers that never change their identity so that a speck of Mississippi mud and an individual red blood cell are both seen as carrying unalterable identity, permanent membership in human cultures. This is the mysticism that allows fascist movements to call up images of long-dispersed and -recombined ancestral peoples like the ancient Aryans and Romans, or entirely mythic genetic strains like White Race, and then scream for genocide to return them to a state of purity.

The reality is that people circulate like dust, intermingling and reforming, all of us equally ancient on this Earth, all equally made of the fragments of long-exploded stars, and if, by some unlikely miracle, a branch of our ancestors has lived in the same place for a thousand years, this does not make them more real than the ones who have continued circulating for that same millennium. All of us have been here since people were people. All of us belong on Earth.

So, what about the stealing of land? What about all the colonized places on Earth? What of indigenous peoples forcibly removed by invaders? The crime here is a deeper and more lasting one than theft, akin in some ways to enslavement. Before land can be stolen, it must become property. The relationships built over time between the land and the human members of its ecosystem must be severed just as ties of family and village and co-humanity were severed so that slavers could enslave. The indigenous peoples of the Americas did not own land in the European sense. They lived with and from the land and counted it as a relative. The blow that cracked Hawaiian sovereignty was the imposition of landownership. At gunpoint, Hawaiians were forced to divide sacred and common land, to commodify it, price it, allot it. In Europe itself it was the enclosure of the

commons, the grazing lands and great forests from which people subsisted, that created a massive class of landless laborers to fill the factories and transport the goods of industrial capitalism. Earth-centered cultures everywhere held our kinship with land and animals and plants as core knowledge, central to living. The land had to be soaked with blood and that knowledge, those cultures shattered before private ownership could be erected. It wasn't just theft.

9

And yet owning has seemed like such a good defense. With the commons gone, strive to own. With the land commodified and confiscated, struggle to enforce treaties. If you are driven away, fight to return. For Jews, barred for centuries from landholding, how legitimating, how healing, what a chance to strike back at history it is to acquire land. Why should we alone be excluded? When Baron von Hirsch sought to help the Jews of Eastern Europe escape the pogroms, he bought them land—in Argentina, in New Jersey, in other places—and settled them there to farm. Landlessness had been a central feature of Jewish oppression. Having land became a symbol of resistance. Our own connections with land have been severed time after time. We would come to know and trust a particular landscape, to understand Babylonian weather, to know the growing seasons of Andalucía, to recognize the edible wild foods of the woods around Rouen, the wildflowers on the Dnieper or the Rhine or the Thames, and it would be time for another hurried departure. To have land, to farm became one of the most emotionally powerful images of Jewish freedom, even when getting land meant severing someone else's ties to it. Even when it meant tearing the olive trees and the fragrant dust and the taste of desert spring water out of the lives of Palestinians whose love for the land was hundreds of generations deep.

In the 1930s my father's family sang this song, translated from the Yiddish of Russian Jews:

On the road to Sebastopol,
not so far from Simfaropol
Just you go a little further on.
There you'll see a collective farm,

run by sturdy Jewish arms
and it's called Zhankoye, Zhan.
Aunt Natasha drives the tractor,
Grandma runs the cream extractor
as we work we all can sing this song:
Who says Jews cannot be farmers?
Spit in his eye who would so harm us.
Tell him of Zhankoye, Zhan.

10

Landownership was only a hundred years old in Indiera when I was growing up. Its hold on people's imaginations was still tenuous. It was not until the 1860s that the Massaris and Nigaglionis, Agostinis and Pachecos began filing title claims to large stretches of mountain lands. That there were already people living on and from that land was irrelevant, because none of them had surveyed it, fenced it, paid a lawyer to draw up deeds to it. Since at least the 1570s the mountains had been worked by wandering subsistence farmers who would clear and burn off a bit of forest, cultivate it for a few years, and move on while the land renewed itself. Descendants of Arawak and other indigenous people enslaved by the Spanish, runaway slaves, and poor Europeans, the people of the mountains didn't own the land. They moved across it and lived from it.

The new settlers owned and profited. Our own farm was carved out by a Corsican named Massari who, like the others, planted the new boom crop, arabiga coffee, for faraway markets. Then it was owned by Pla, who was Mallorcan. Then by my parents. But the neighbors who held small plots and worked other people's land for cash never seemed to take boundaries seriously, the way my neighbors in New England did. Everyone harvested bananas, root vegetables, oranges, and wood from the farms of the Canabals, the Nigaglionis, or Delfín Rodriguez, who only kept Hacienda Indiera as a tax write-off to protect his sugar profits. Our neighbor to the north, Chago Soto, was always moving the fence between our properties. On one visit we found that Cheito Agostini had built pens for his pigs on our side of the road. Another time, exploring the deep overgrown valley on the back side of our land, my sister-in-law and I stumbled across a cement holding tank built over one of the springs and plastic pipes leading the

water out to a house and garden. It was only when we introduced ourselves to the man loading a truck in front of the house and saw his chagrin that we realized the water was on our side of the property line.

What do communist landholders do with privilege? My father says you have to get rid of it or use it for the common good. So we tell Cheito he can keep the pigs there, but no more dumping piles of Pampers and no permanent structures. We let the farmer to the north know that we understand the water came from our land, and for now it's okay. But what are we doing with this land at all, now that we don't live there?

11

Class privilege allows us this option: to see ourselves as stewards of this land. Because we don't need to live from these thirty-four acres we can resist the pressure to sell. Our neighbors keep asking Can't you sell me a piece of the farm to expand my coffee, my bananas, to build a house? After all, you're not using it. Poverty does not allow them the luxury of thinking twenty or thirty years ahead, but we know that the portion of our land they want to buy now for farming cash crops would pass through their hands and into other uses and that in thirty years this place would be cut into lots for cement houses. My mother says the rich ruin the poor and the poor ruin the land.

From up here in the cordillera you can see where the rich ruin land directly. We grew up with the smudge of poisoned air over Guayanilla, where the oil refineries used to make such a stench we would always buy sweet maví to drink before we got there so we could hold the cups over our noses as we went by. There are puffs of dust where the limestone hills are being bulldozed and ground into cement for more housing developments, shopping malls, factories. So much of the land has been paved, in fact, that the drenching rains of autumn have nowhere to soak in. The water runs off into the sea now, and the water table has dropped so much that last year some neighborhoods in San Juan went without water for weeks at a time. But up here it hasn't yet been worth the developers' while. Here it's the desperation they've created in the lives of the poor that does the work for them.

Between the land hunger of the poor to turn acreage into a little money and the commodification of the earth into real estate, only privilege

seems able to preserve the land. The Rockefellers, buying up islands, keep pockets of wildness alive in the Caribbean while deforestation and massive shopping malls destroy the freshwater supplies of Puerto Rico, leaving everyone thirsty.

This is what we want our privilege to buy, my brothers and I. Because of how we lived there, because of the ways our parents cherished and nurtured our intimacy with the land, we know we're kin to it. We don't want it to die. But we also want to give the land a chance to tell its story and the story of the people who have worked it. On that overgrown abandoned coffee farm in the middle of increasingly cleared and pesticide-soaked lands, we dream of building a cultural center and museum of the history and ecology of Indiera, where the community can participate in retelling its past. We dream of experimental plots where farmers can try new crops without risking their income. We hope that in this process of storytelling and experimenting, the people of Indiera will rediscover pride in their heritage of work and a new sense of their connection to this land. By drawing tourist dollars from the nearby Panoramic Highway, we also want to model another way of living from the land, in which livelihood comes not from extracting the land's wealth but from telling in as much detail as we can the complex story of our relations with it.

I imagine this museum filled with family photographs, letters from the migrant children who moved away, and recorded voices of elders testifying. I imagine showing the people who grow coffee the faces of the people who drink it and vice versa. I imagine a narrow pathway winding down into the rain valley through the forest of tree ferns, South American shade trees, wild guavas, and African Tulip trees. I remember how my father used to take his microscope down to the schoolhouse and how the children would crowd around waiting for a turn to be amazed at what the world looks like close up. I imagine the children of the barrio walking among the photographs and voices and trees that way, renaming their place on this land and in the world.

12

Because the land is alive, our relationship with it is real. We are kin to the land, love it, know it, become intimate with its ways, sometimes over many generations. Surely such kinship and love must be honored. Nation-

alism does not honor it. Nationalism is about gaining control, not about loving land. But it wears the cloak of that love, strips it from its sensual and practical roots and raises it into a banner for armies. The land invoked as a battle cry is not the same land that smells of sage or turns blue in the dusk or clings thickly to our boots after rain. That land is less than nothing to the speech makers.

The land invoked to the beating of nationalist drums is what lies at the linguistic roots of the term "real estate," meaning royal property. It is the land my hacendado forebears kept in the bank, ransacked, used to pay the bills. The land bristling with No Trespassing signs, the land the lords of Europe enclosed against the peasants in the infancy of capitalism, the land as symbol of power over. It is the land we can be mobilized to recapture because, with its fences and mortgages and deeds, it has been the symbol of our dispossession.

13

Ownership shatters ecology. For the land to survive, for us to survive, it must cease to be property. It cannot continue to sustain us for much longer under the weight of such a merciless use. We know this. We know the insatiable hunger for profit that drives that use and the disempowerment that accommodates it. We don't yet know how to make it stop.

But where ecology meets culture there are other questions: How do we hold in common not only the land, but all the fragile, tenacious rootedness of human beings to the ground of our histories, the cultural residues of our daily work, the individual and tribal longings for place? How do we abolish ownership of land and still respect people's ties to it? How do we shift the weight of our times from the single-minded nationalist drive for a piece of territory and the increasingly barricaded self-interest of even the marginally privileged toward a rich and multilayered sense of collective heritage? I don't have the answers, but I know that only when we can hold each people's particular memories and connections with the land as a common treasure can the knowledge of our place on it be restored.

TORTURERS

Many years ago, for a few months, the media was full of the story of two ten-year-old English boys who had beaten a toddler to death. The coverage dripped with revulsion and hatred toward these children. They were described as inhuman, as evil, as bad seed. Reporters exclaimed, enraged, that they showed no remorse and wished aloud that there was a death penalty for ten-year-olds. The complete rejection of the boys couldn't be said often or loudly or vehemently enough. *They are not of us. We are not like them. They must be destroyed.* What I didn't hear anyone ask was what had to happen to a pair of children that by the age of ten they could batter another child to death with a brick.

Torturers are made, not born. We know enough about the repetitive cycles of violence, enough about the training of secret police and death squads, special military units and spies to know that the way you learn to torture is by being tortured. I know this from the inside. For a period of five years during my childhood, I was systematically subjected to sexual torture as part of the international industry of pornography and commercial rape. The men who did this to me were professionals. Their techniques included drugging and physical, sexual, and psychological tortures, and their victims were mostly, though not exclusively, children.

It was clear that the torture had several goals. Direct intimidation, including threats against my family, psychological manipulation to make

me believe they could control and punish me from afar, and drugs and lies to confuse me about the actual events, were all designed to prevent me from getting help and exposing them. But they were also trying to reproduce themselves in me and the other children, to separate us from our own humanity and make us capable of doing what they did.

Because, by the time they got hold of me, I was already a highly politicized child, because I already knew about political torture and resistance to it, I was able to make a different meaning out of the experience, which ultimately defeated them and saved me. They kept me from telling anyone what was happening to me, but they didn't make me into a torturer. I knew that I was powerless to prevent what they did to my body but discovered, like many a political prisoner, that I could safeguard my spirit.

I understood that the first step in becoming like them was to learn to dehumanize others, and that part of the goal of their cruelty was to make us hate them, make us want to hurt them, make us see them as monsters we would be willing to torment. To plant in us the seeds of their own pain.

Part of the way I prevented this was to envision my abusers as young children, before they became this cruel. I would imagine that imprisoned within the adult bodies that hurt me were captive children who had themselves been tortured. I would pretend I could catch their eyes, send them signals of solidarity to give them courage. I imagined how horrified they had to be at the actions of their grown-up selves. This was part of what enabled me to survive spiritually.

This experience, and the stories I have heard from other survivors of torture, whether inflicted by governments or groups of private individuals, has left me with a sense of urgency to understand how children grow up to be torturers and how torturers sometimes, often suddenly, become incapable of continuing to torture.

This is a critical question for a number of reasons. Obviously, if we can figure out how to stop the reproduction of torture, the world will be a safer place for all of us. But it is also true that if we have nothing but retribution to offer the perpetrators of the world, we will, in an important sense, become like them. We cannot hold out a political vision of a compassionate world, inclusive and just, and reject their wounded humanity. The urge to punish, to execute, to wipe them out, is a refusal to consider what we ourselves might be capable of.

We can't just move the toxic wastes of oppression from site to site, using cruelty to punish the cruel, imprisoning dictators and mercenaries, terrorists and war criminals, sealing them in supposedly leak-proof containers, like so much radioactive sludge. The ones who are lined up against a wall and shot for their crimes leave bitterly grieving families whose bitter grievances will fester and erupt.

I speak for the torturers, because they are the tortured who did not survive intact. I speak for the ones who were so numbed by the world they saw and the part they were told to play in it that they cannot understand the reality of the harm they do. Of the men who tortured me I wrote:

> There are people in this world
> so terrified that they hunger, night and day,
> for the fear of others.
> There are people in this world
> who can show their wounds.
> only by inflicting them,
> and the story of my body
> is also the map of their unspeakable pain.

To me the choice seems difficult and clear: either we are committed to making a world in which all people are of value, everyone redeemable, or we surrender to the idea that some of us are truly better and more deserving of life than others, and once we open the door to that possibility, we cannot control it. If we are willing to say that some people don't matter, that some people are unaffordable for the planet, that some people's actions have placed them beyond the pale, then what forgiveness is there for any of us if we commit errors, even crimes? If we agree to accept limits on who is included in humanity, then we will become more and more like those we oppose. Do we really need to name the list of atrocities committed by people who claimed to act in the name of human liberation?

Salvadoran revolutionary poet Roque Dalton, murdered by a different faction of his own country's left, wrote in his poem "Todos," "Altogether they have more death than we, but altogether we have more life than they." For this to be true, we must hold a larger vision of what is possible than the people who kill and torture and ravage. In her remarkable novel

The Fifth Sacred Thing, Starhawk explores the challenge of this choice in depth. The future egalitarian community of San Francisco must devise a strategy of resistance against remorselessly brutal armies from a nightmare South characterized by corporate wealth, fanatically bigoted religion, and extremes of social control. Having principles is easy when not much is at stake. The dilemma Starhawk sets her characters is much harder: How is it possible to face violence strong enough to destroy all that you love and not become corrupted by it? The strategy of the elders is twofold: to face the invaders with the human consequences of their actions and to continually invite them to abandon the role of abuser and rejoin humanity. One of the characters says, "We will have victory only if we are stronger healers than they are warriors."

In a recent communique from the Zapatistas, marking the twentieth anniversary of their 1994 uprising, they spoke of the choice that confronted them early on: to become better soldiers in order to more effectively fight the Mexican military, or to concentrate on building the society they wanted to live in within the territories where they were strongest. The risk of the second choice was that the state would destroy them, but the risk of the first was that they would destroy themselves.

A fully just society in which human potential is never despised or thrown away is possible only if that invitation to a restoration of integrity and community is always open. There is nothing more moving to me than the stories of people who had the courage to reclaim their humanity even after full participation in the shameful. And often it is being confronted with the real consequences of their actions, glimpsing the humanity of those they are hurting, that breaks the numbness of the perpetrators and enables them to make new choices.

One of the consequences of oppression is that it is morally corrupting, not only of those who exercise power over others but also of those who are rendered powerless. All of us have had failures of integrity. I believe part of what makes it so hard to consider perpetrators as part of our constituency is that we cannot bear to examine the ways we resemble them. Until we confront the moments when we have been co-opted, coerced, or seduced into harming others, we will be vulnerable to defensive self-righteousness. Like those English reporters, we will exclaim in horror over the crimes without taking responsibility for a world that keeps turning children into criminals.

What I am calling for is not a liberal policy of forgiving and forgetting, nor the public relations maneuver of mass pardons and political absolutions, nor starting from scratch. I am holding out for a radical refusal to compromise on the possibility of any one of us to heal, make new moral choices, make amends, and reclaim kinship with those we have harmed. A justice that is truly restorative.

There is a place for righteous rage at the torturers and a place to demand accountability and hard work. But punishment is not a tool of liberation. It is the powerless exercise of violence by those who can think of nothing better. It is the refusal to acknowledge our kinship with those who hurt us. It is a laying down of our vision, and ultimately, if we cannot overcome the urge to punish, our vision, which is what truly distinguishes us from those we oppose, will die.

HISTERIMONIA

Declarations of a Trafficked Girl, or Why I Couldn't Write This Essay

Because when I set myself to write what I call an histerimonia of my own sexual exploitation within the immense and malevolent traffic in raped girls and women, the project poisoned me with nightmares and I could not maintain residence in my own flesh.

Because since the day I announced my intentions, I haven't eaten or slept well, always watching the darkness, waiting for them to appear, as they promised, those men with knife eyes who threatened me with torture and death if I talked. Because I am never at a loss for words, and yet I feel mute, because for this, we have to invent languages, and I don't know how to draw the map of this crime, explain its dimensions—global in width, ancient in depth, a distanced international enterprise and at the same time the most intimate massacre of personal sovereignty.

FRAGMENT 1

I was born in Barrio Indiera Baja in the town of Maricao, in the highlands of western Puerto Rico. Indiera, one of the last refuges of the indigenous people of my land, and Maricao, which means "the suffering" or "sacrifice," the *cao* of Mari, an indigenous woman who was most certainly not named Maria. The legend says that she betrayed her people for love of a Spaniard and that they killed her for the crime,

but that's how the legends of conquerors go. We don't know what she suffered, nor at whose hands, but we know what native women tend to suffer at the hands of the invading soldiers of foreign empires. Maricao is also the name of a tree of our cordillera forests, on the road to extinction, with yellow flowers and bitter, juicy fruits. It's the place where I collided with two violences, the ecological and the sexual.

In the imagination of the invaders, women, our peoples, and nature share a rapeable femininity, created by divine mandate for the enjoyment of privileged man. Women and trees suffer the blows of a single ideology.

Because it nauseates me to read and translate these quotes from rapist conquerors, because rage sickens me and I get headaches, because my pacifism runs away howling, because while I jot down the words of men who've been dead for centuries, I know that more than a million girls and boys enter into slavery every year, in other words, in the twenty minutes in which I take my turn here, forty-six minors will be enslaved, that there are more slaves now than at the height of the African slave trade to the Americas, and every day, in the name of commerce, twenty thousand hectares of tropical forests, the lungs of the world, are destroyed, along with 135 species of plants, insects, and animals, our necessary kin.

Because rape is not a casual or marginal effect of conquest; it's a fundamental strategy of domination. Sexual violence seeks to destroy our most basic sovereignty. It invades us beyond our skin and marks us as territory. Its intent it to ruin whatever position of respect and authority we may hold in our own societies, rip the fabric of communal kinship, and rename us as property, without a will of our own.

Because even if I limit myself to my small and unique island, you will see that rape has been, from the very first moments of the European invasion of the Caribbean, a systematic practice and central metaphor of our domination. Listen:

FRAGMENT 2

An Italian aristocrat by the name of Cuneo who sailed with Columbus wrote, "I captured a very beautiful Carib woman, whom the said Lord Admiral [Columbus] gave to me and with whom . . . I conceived the

desire to take pleasure. I wanted to put my desire into execution but she did not want it and treated me with her fingernails in such a manner that I wished I had never begun. But seeing that, I took a rope and thrashed her well. . . . Finally, we came to an agreement." Well do I know that kind of agreement.

Chroniclers of the US invasion of 1898 describe the landscape itself as voluptuous and fertile, "yielding herself to our virile marines."

In his Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of Columbus, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (1942), US Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, "In the Bahamas, Cuba and Hispaniola they found young and beautiful women, who everywhere were naked, in most places accessible, and presumably complaisant." Presumed by whom? Echoing the writers of 1898, he too describes the conquest of the Americas in sexual terms: "Never again may mortal men hope to recapture the amazement, the wonder, the delight of those October days in 1492, when the new world gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering Castilians." Gracefully.

In the romance of conquest, the land and its people are equally subject to sexual assault, imagined as welcome rape, and the right the invaders felt to the bodies of indigenous women and, later, African women is echoed in their entitlement to use the land as they please, which has led to the no less violent degradation of our ecosystem, the island habitat with which our Taíno ancestors lived sustainably for two thousand years. In the sixteenth century, the forests of Puerto Rico reached all the way to beaches and covered 90 percent of the terrain. By 1900 it was only 10 percent. Today the ever scarcer rains carry away the soil of the cordillera, leaving behind the scars of erosion because deforestation has left us without roots.

Because this is not an academic exercise. Because I also carry scars.

FRAGMENT 3

Taken in this context, the violent production of pornography as a cottage industry of the Puerto Rican countryside has a certain historical logic. Systematic rape for profit, the sale and rental of girls and women for sexual exploitation, is a predictable extension of the sociosexual

relations of imperialism in our region. The international and local trade in women and girls is nothing new.

At the beginning of the 1960s, I was one of those girls. My fourth-grade teacher was the leader of a pornography enterprise with perhaps a dozen managers and a line of clients who came up from the coast to enjoy the merchandise. He threatened me with the death of my family, a family already sufficiently threatened as communists under surveillance during a time of repression. My *cao* began with a drugged can of peach nectar and lasted almost five years.

Because I feel lightning strike when I speak. Because rage consumes me. Because rage can be a wildfire, incinerating the inner landscape, leaving only coals and ash, a savage current that erupts in sparks of fury that burn everything they touch. But suppressed, it turns into inflammations that sicken us, smoke that deprives us of oxygen. In order to be of use, it must be concentrated, focused, turned into a blowtorch that can melt obstacles and solder visions, made to illuminate—and I only know how to do this with art, but it's not yet within my reach.

FRAGMENT 4

The human trafficking industry is the third largest criminal enterprise in the world, after drugs and arms. One writer on the subject, who exposed a network of traffickers in the town closest to my own, thinks it's a sign of the moral decadence of our times and blames the mothers and food stamps. There's no question that it's moral decadence, but it's not recent, nor does it have anything to do with the brave mothers of my country or the crumbs of food the government tosses us to keep us on our feet and working. It's a global decadence, a criminality closely tied to those other worldwide crimes: empire, poverty, racism, sexism, war.

But its face is local. I have seen the consumers of my suffering, men with thick fingers, heavy gold rings, avid faces, and blurred eyes, and I recognize them. Whether on a coffee farm in Yauco, a hotel in San Juan or Bangkok, or a basement full of chains and beds in San Francisco or New York, the faces are local. In every part of the market, there are those who eat their young with the same fervor with which corporations eat the planet, in a fever that is both suicidal and murderous.

Because when I talk about women and ecology, the ethical principles that nature imposes, of the communal, horizontal, strategic skills women have cultivated out of necessity over thousands of years of work, our talents for thinking collectively, not inherent but drawn from a long experience of labor, I do not want to be confused with bourgeois essentialist ecofeminists, expropriators of indigenous cultures, romanticizing lands and people with the same enthusiasm with which their ancestors pillaged them.

Because I don't want to be misinterpreted when I speak of the infinite web of relationships that bind the beings, seas, minerals of our planet, millions and millions of threads that form a dense and living fabric, the entity we are, because it is neither metaphor or mysticism but the autumn rains on the hard red clay of Indiera, up there in the lap of the sky, falling on that flowering, devastated, poisoned, living mountain with its strong and desperate people, that taught it to me.

Because it's not liberalism but a hard-won truth when I say that the addicts of domination are orphans, that they recognize no kinship, that they bleed from where those threads once bound them to the universe, driven mad by the wounds of disconnection.

FRAGMENT 5

I have just read this about trauma, what happens in our bodies when we can neither defend ourselves nor flee, like me. The delicate, complex systems of our immunity unravel, and that moment of powerlessness, of finding ourselves defenseless in the face of the terrible, extends itself, becomes a permanent condition. With no other choice, the body, in a state of panic, turns against its own cells. What happens, I ask myself, when an entire people is captive? We can't flee, and all our fierce resistance hasn't protected us. We suffer from a social autoimmunity in which the infinite violence and dehumanization of the past five centuries, the internalization of a merciless oppression, has left us inflamed with rage, witnessing how our wounded society devours itself.

I am an artist of needle and thread, looking for ways to mend this battered fabric. I am a curandera opening paths to use our rage and rebuild our resilience. The struggle for the integrity of our bodies is the ground from which we fight for everything else.

Because I bled for a week and dreamed of a girl with dark eyes whom I, single, sick, poor, could not take care of, and I chose my voice, my vocation, my own life, and the other lives I helped to save, and of the six countries in the world in which I could not have made this decision, even if those who raped me had left me pregnant at the age of twelve, not even to save my physical and literal life, four are in Latin America, and among them are those who defend their economies and territories from imperialism, but not my body.

FRAGMENT 6

We who dream, imagine, struggle, and work for a liberated world live between two realities, the possible and the actual, with one foot in each. Here in the actual, we can't have everything. We have to choose. But we have to choose what will offer us the most future, what gives us the greatest possibility of having it all when another time comes. I am not one of those who say that fetuses are not lives, but between those precious, unripe buds and the sovereignty and potential of their mothers, I choose the women. We are the most committed, the only ones capable of building societies in which no woman has to risk poverty, exhaustion, isolation, and the sacrifice of every other dream in order to raise the next generation, almost always in a state of psychic malnutrition.

A century ago Puerto Rican feminist Luisa Capetillo said, "If you don't want women to sell themselves for bread, give them bread." Instead of criminalizing and punishing the woman who tries, painfully and at great personal cost, to save herself, and perhaps other members of her family, by means of abortion, make it unnecessary. Develop safe, effective, free, and available contraceptive technologies and abundant economic, social, and cultural support for the work of child rearing.

The girls and boys of the world who live in poverty, the displaced, the orphaned, the abandoned, the homeless, are the most vulnerable to trafficking, my little sisters and brothers who right now, and now, and now, are suffering what I suffered. For me that nightmare ended. I don't know why. They stopped coming for me. But for the forty-six children captured while I've been standing here reading this to you, it's only just begun.

> Why is it that governments are so concerned with innocent lives (as if there were such a thing as guilty lives, lives we could condemn to suffering without sinning), and only until they are born? And if more are born than a family can take good care of, and no one has an eye on them, if they are born in slums and war zones and these girls, these boys disappear, carried away by the current of the rape industry, politicians don't take to the streets, indignant, or promise to resign their office if the traffic doesn't end.[1]

Because I can't do it alone. Because to heal the girl I was, I must fight for the woman I am, and that can only be done among sisters. Because we are the majority, women and children, and sovereign, powerful, healed, we could change even the orbit of the earth; because we don't yet know it, because to understand it, we must be together.

> Last word: Nowadays there is a lot of talk of the patria grande, the greater American homeland, and the unifying dreams of Bolívar, but I have never trusted that word patria. Nations emerged when the obedience and loyalty once sworn to individual aristocrats had to be transferred to an entire class, and it's not a coincidence that patria comes from the same root as "patriarch," "patrimony," "patriarchy." The loyalty I swear is not to nations or governments. My loyalty is to a far broader and deeper integration. I am faithful to the web of vital connections between all that lives, and being faithful to that web requires practicing ecological ethics, requires defending whoever needs it, requires interweaving intimate and communal sovereignties in what could perhaps be called the matria, from the same root as matriz, "womb," the reestablishment of kinship. Only so, spinning and weaving that fine, strong, relational gauze, will we be able to bind our wounds, mine, those of my people, and those of my planet.

NOTE

1. In 2013 President Rafael Correa of Ecuador threatened to resign if the country's strict abortion laws were liberalized.

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BUILDING RADICAL SOIL

One of the advantages of growing up in a multigeneration radical family is the way history inhabits our bones. During the past century, my family has defied the Russian tsar, the Spanish crown, the colonial government of Puerto Rico, and many manifestations of the US power, including the House Un-American Activities Committee. Between us we've organized coffee farm laborers and hospital janitors, feminist women's groups and arts collectives, taught radical history and science, fought for reproductive and labor rights, on behalf of political prisoners and poisoned waters, and taken part in all the social movements of our times. We have inherited a broad, visceral experience of radicalism.

We've also inherited decisions about coalitions and splits, arguments about priorities, urgencies, and long views, strategies that worked and didn't, choices that backfired and those that bore fruit. Our cousin Evaristo Izcoa Díaz started one banned newspaper after another, organized armed resistance to the US invasion in 1898, and died young from tuberculosis he contracted in prison. He was outspoken and provocative, good on some issues, bad on others, defended a mulata girl raped by the sons of her town's elite and denounced the behavior of US occupation soldiers, but badmouthed Afro–Puerto Rican bomba dancing as "savage." My great-grandmother Leah organized immigrant women in sweatshops and worked with Margaret Sanger distributing birth control information in

the tenements, and the support of Sanger and many otherwise progressive people for eugenics contributed to the Nazi ideology that exterminated Leah's village in Ukraine. We inherited my grandfather's leadership of the Communist Youth League when it split from the Young People's Socialist League over opposition to World War I, the complex relations between the communist and nationalist parties during the repressive 1950s in Puerto Rico, the struggles of second-wave feminism to grapple with multiple, seemingly contradictory layers of privilege and pain, the life-eroding concessions of labor, and the undisciplined fury of rebels measuring militancy in decibels. We inherited lessons, context, big pictures.

One of the things I have found is that a long line of radical ancestors can give people a kind of political shock absorber. We become better able to weather the sometimes appalling gaps between principles and practice, without assuming the principles were wrong. Failures don't tend to make us give up. We have an inherited long view and are less likely to have an all-or-nothing response to the ups and downs of our movements. In some ways, our family histories protect us from the ravages of cynicism and the tempestuous sense of urgency that we know is a permanent feature of radicalism in the face of oppression. Our beliefs have been tested over long expanses of time, against more varied backgrounds, and drawn from a greater variety of lives than those whose experience of radicalism is drawn from a single lifetime or generation.

On the other hand, there is a fresh incisiveness to the questions asked by the newly radicalized. My father, Dick, was a fifth-generation radical. My mother, Sari, found Marxism and feminism for herself and grabbed on with both hands to a body of thought that, as she told me, "explained my life." My mother's sharp questions, her skepticism, her unwillingness to give up her own critical thinking in the face of any authority, kept my father's deep-rooted communism on its toes. My mother didn't have a known lineage of radicals. What she had instead was boundless curiosity and unflinching intellectual honesty. She made her own lineage by finding the thinkers whose work fed her own: Eleanor Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Olive Schreiner, Meridel Le Sueur, Emma Goldman. She studied women who, in generations before her, had tackled both class and gender to find out what they had figured out that she might be able to use, and then immersed herself in the voices of Women of Color whose writing exploded into print in her middle age, and contributed

important work of her own to the complex task of organizing on multiple fronts at once.

The lesson I take from this is that a rich and personal historical soil grows strong, stable roots. That soil needn't be one's biological family, but in a time of imposed amnesias, when it's hard to hold onto the lessons of ten years ago, let alone two hundred, having a lineage of some kind, a way to access that long view, is a powerful source of resilience. It's worth discovering who your political ancestors are, tracing your genealogies of empowerment.

This calls for a practice that goes far beyond reading books on history and political analysis. For history to enter our bones, we need more than facts and theories. Soil is more than a collection of mineral molecules. It's organic and alive, composed of rotting leaves and underground runners, fungal threads and billions of bacteria, seeds dropped by birds and dust blown from the other side of the world. Clay, sand, rock, and plant matter, local weather and regional climate, latitude and season, all interact with each other and are changed. Soil is not a list of ingredients. It's relational, and so is our sense of history.

It's been nearly fifty years since I was the youngest member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. It's a short time in the sweep of human history, even in the history of feminism. But people born in that year are in their middle age, and our current movements are mostly made up of people born long after the powerful wave of the women's movement swept this country and then subsided. They can read the things we wrote and what was written about us, but they do so in a time of escalating political repression, of ferocious backlash against women, the professionalization of feminism as an academic discipline, and the relentless reality distortions of our media-saturated lives.

Films like *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* that show the diversity and multiple birthplaces of the women's movement, and more focused documentaries like *Left on Pearl*, about the establishment of the Women's Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, are invaluable for conveying a sense of the lived experience of those times, but cross-generational conversation and collaboration on a large scale are still the most powerful builders of historical soil. It was watching my parents grapple with actual situations and apply what their pasts had taught them, sometimes citing an experience two generations back or drawn from the

historical memory of those people, to reach even further back, that taught me the uses of history.

Radical collective memory is a major threat to the status quo. Those of us who are elders need to take seriously our soil-building responsibilities, not by lecturing the young but by engaging in deep conversations, listening to their burning concerns, questions, and confusions and offering up our segment of the long road for consideration. In a time of geographic mobility, fractured memory, and the instant media reshaping of events, many of the younger radicals I talk with are hungry for intergenerational relationships. They need access to our experience, not as a set of instructions but as a mineral-rich environment in which to grow.

CIRCLE UNBROKEN

The Politics of Inclusion

Historically, attempts to create unity across difference have depended, by and large, on the strategy of a lowest-common-denominator goal, with all other agendas and aspirations put on hold. The inevitable result is that when that limited goal is won, this temporary alliance, no matter how powerful it has been in the short run, collapses. The US suffrage movement increasingly focused on the vote as a single issue to which all of women's other needs were subordinated. This policy alienated and excluded many women, especially Black, poor, indigenous, and immigrant women, and once suffrage was achieved, the movement dissipated. Nicaraguans in large numbers could be brought together around a program of removing Somoza, even though there was no agreement about what to do with the country afterward.

Deep-rooted and lasting change needs a broad base of support, and it has become more and more clear to me that any broad and enduring alliance with the goal of radically changing social structures needs to be based on a different kind of unity. For this purpose, it is no longer useful to keep doing single-oppression theory, to keep defining and elaborating our understandings of the exact nature of racism, sexism, class, sexual orientation as if they ever operated in isolation. In the very beginning stages of a movement, it can be useful for a very short while to concentrate on

defining the parameters of a single underexamined power relationship. But the interest and usefulness of this approach wears thin quite rapidly.

My experience of the women's liberation movement in the US demonstrates this clearly. For a period of five years at most, and that's probably stretching it, it was possible for large numbers of feminists to talk about "women" in a fairly uncomplicated way as we named the most discernible features of male domination. Of course, what was most discernible varied immensely depending on who was looking, and by the early 1970s lesbians were presenting major challenges to the heterosexism within the women's movement, closely followed, at least in the organizations in which I participated, by Women of Color exposing the racism that shaped both our agendas and our ways of working, and working class women challenging assumptions about the commonalities of our lives, and therefore our priorities. Since that time, more and more constituencies of women have insisted that the specific conditions of our different lives, and the whole spectrum of skills and knowledge arising from them, must be equally central to feminism if it is to have any validity.

It is not possible to win large numbers of women to a program of ending male domination, if what is required is that we leave aside all the other components of our lives: colonialism, class oppression, racism, heterosexism, disability, all the complexities of gender and much more. If we are required to pretend that male domination affects all women in the same ways. If we are asked to leave aside the particularities of our lives for a privileged generalization. Only a feminism that fully integrates the expertise of all women, that does not indulge in a hierarchy of liberation agendas, will be capable of bringing large numbers of women together in long-term alliance. Therefore the theory we need to be developing is that which helps us understand the relationships between our different and multifaceted lives, with all their specific struggles and resources. Rather than build unity through simplification, we must learn to embrace multiple rallying points and understand their inherent interdependence.

Such a theory needs to shed the metaphor of "intersections" of oppression and assume a much more organic interpenetration of institutional systems of power. The idea of intersection treats the social categories "woman," "working class," "lesbian," "person of color," and so on as if it were possible to separate someone's womanness from her class position,

her "racial" or ethnic position, and so on. But these social categories do not exist anywhere in their "pure" state. Every woman is a woman of some class, some ethnicity, some sexual orientation, some country. The notion that working-class, colonized Women of Color suffer from triple jeopardy has always bothered me, because the implication is that racism and class oppression have no effect on those who are privileged by it. There is no such thing as single jeopardy. The only way to believe that the isms are separable is by ignoring privilege—so that upper-class, heterosexual, European and US white women are thought about only in the context of gender, as if people existed only in the categories in which they are oppressed. Social categories don't intersect like separate geometric planes. Each one is wholly dependent on all the others for its existence. For a liberation theory to be useful, it must address the way systems of oppression and privilege saturate each other, are mutually necessary, have no independent existence.

My father, Richard Levins, said that any time progressive causes seem to be in conflict, it's because neither group is asking enough. Because no one has been able to imagine a solution big enough to meet everyone's needs—as when, for example, the employment of loggers and the preservation of forests are pitted against each other in a bitter struggle over which unsatisfactory solution to opt for. But the creation of an economy that preserves both people and trees is outside the parameters of the debate.

To organize social change on the basis of all people's real needs, refusing to sacrifice anyone, does not mean conducting two thousand fragmented campaigns at once. It doesn't mean making sure to add a few clauses in the last paragraph of the speech that mention all the people we "should" include. Such cosmetic inclusion, whether in theory or in practice, always looks uncomfortably acrobatic to me—unnecessarily complicated, and at the same time evasive. It's a maneuver to preserve that privileged and simplistic worldview that makes inequity tolerable.

Real inclusion is both straightforward and intricate, complex and interesting enough to spend a lifetime at. It just requires that we understand enough about how our lives are entwined that whatever social justice task we undertake, we figure out how the question we're asking or the particular piece of injustice we're confronting can be made big enough, connected enough, to be useful to everyone. The most useful theory will

be that which teaches us to use the particular, to frame big and inclusive questions, to integrate seemingly conflicting needs and sacrifice no one.

To craft a theory that can explain why we mustn't abandon anyone, it is necessary to have an explanation for people's bad decisions that is not based on their having inherent flaws. If we refuse to essentialize people, we need to have a historical explanation for stupid and destructive behavior.

The concept of internalized oppression, that collective historical trauma has powerful and lasting effects on individuals and communities, provides the most important insights into the behavior of oppressed people. Seeing how internalized institutional abuse affects people's choices allows me to explain their actions as separate from their potential—to say that people make the best choices of which they are capable at any particular moment. A theory of internalized oppression offers all kinds of strategies for coping with the difficulties of organizing. Without the tools to understand, identify, and develop strategies to address internalized oppression, our tendency is to define the people who most clearly show its impact on them as "defective", but if we see problematic behaviors as a day-to-day manifestation of systemic injustice, we can use challenging interactions to deepen our expertise and strengthen our alliances. Similarly, internalized privilege distorts our capacity to see common interests, notice large areas of social interaction in which we are privileged and others are not, or have a realistic sense of our own role in collaboration with others.

When we're faced with people acting in ways that seem to go against their own interests it's important to remember that we always have agency. All our responses to our conditions are strategic, the best we could come up with at the moment. We are always trying to figure out how best to survive and thrive. Sometimes our ability to accurately assess our situation, the probable impact of our actions, where we are most likely to find reliable support, and whose interests lie closest to our own, becomes distorted as we make judgments based on inaccurate expectations of ourselves and others. But we are never simply acted upon. This is critical, especially when we try to understand the seemingly senseless actions of people whose experience of oppression is significantly different from our own. Unless we understand the complex motivations that lie behind people's decisions, we will be likely to essentialize them in the most pa-

tronizing ways, so that the effects of oppression upon them become a justification for continued oppression.

In order to successfully build a politics of inclusion, we need to map the ways in which our own thinking has been affected by our individual, familial, and cultural histories of oppression and resistance. The process of consciousness raising, of naming the specific ways in which our particular experiences of inequity traumatized us, is an invaluable theorizing tool. There are few things as powerful as identifying the manufacturer's mark on what we have perceived as our personal demons. From this process we can emerge with compassionate respect for our own and each other's creativity, based as it often is on incomplete and inaccurate information, and extract lessons about what has and hasn't been effective without needing to shame our earlier selves. This in turn will give us the tools we need to find points of connection with people whose experiences are very different from our own and whose choices we may be inclined to judge.

Full inclusion requires us to root out all the ways in which we have been tricked into collusion with the oppression of others, and all of us have. It requires us to move beyond our comfort zones. I once heard Bernice Reagon say that being in coalition meant working with people we didn't much like, and we might need to vomit over it for a while, but we had to do it anyway. Making a politics of inclusion, of integrity, means not only working with those we don't like but taking responsibility for figuring out in what ways their liberation is bound up with our own, and how our burning issues can be linked. It means refusing the luxury of self-righteousness, that form of liberalism in the name of radicalism through which we agree to avoid people or issues that we can't stand to think about.

It is easy for many leftists to indulge in amused contempt toward movements that don't center our own priorities or are led by people whose traumas and survival strategies make them socially unacceptable. We need to rigorously root out our tendency to patronize or avoid such movements and take charge of finding ways to connect with them that will expand the visions of their movements and our own until we find the point of collaboration.

Solidarity is not a matter of altruism. Solidarity comes from the inability to tolerate the affront to our own integrity of passive or active

collaboration in oppression of others, and from the deep recognition of our most expansive self-interest. From the recognition that, like it or not, our liberation is bound up with that of every other being on the planet, and that politically, spiritually, in our heart of hearts we know anything else is unaffordable.

T A I

A Yom Kippur Sermon, 5778/2017

> This piece was written as a Yom Kippur sermon for Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont, California. The theme of High Holy Days was "spiritual audacity" drawn from these words by Abraham Joshua Heschel, written in 1963: "The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity." The Torah portion preceding this sermon describes the scouts Moses sent into Canaan coming back to report that the people living there were giants, making them feel as small and insignificant as grasshoppers. The date of Yom Kippur was also that of the March for Racial Justice in Washington, DC. Organizers apologized beautifully for scheduling it on the most important Jewish holiday, and Jews all over the US found ways to acknowledge the march and participate from afar, as part of our Yom Kippur observances.

I am from a land of hurricanes, a place where the wind can rip off your roof and send it hurtling through the air to embed pieces of it in the trunks of distant trees. So I know that at the very heart of the biggest, most dangerous storm, there is a place of absolute calm, where the air is still. All around it are walls of wind, full of torn leaves and branches, tin cans and bits of paper. The wind nearest the core is the deadliest, but inside that circle at the center, the sky is blue and the sun shines. Once when we were children, huddled around kerosene lamps inside our shuttered house, tuned into the shortwave radio so we could plot the hurricane's

course, our mother took me and my brother outside, hands held tight, into its eye. We saw great arms of cloud stretching out in an arc a hundred miles wide, saw gray walls of storm, miles high, all around us, while we stood under clear, sunlit skies. My mother was nothing if not audacious, and in the middle of a raging hurricane, she took us to see the sun.

Tai guay nanichino. In the language of my Caribbean indigenous ancestors, these words could simply mean "Good morning, friends." *Nanichi* means "heart" and *no* makes it plural. *Guay* is the sun, and the Catholic priests who came to Boriken, renamed Puerto Rico, men who accompanied and assisted in the conquest and slaughter of my people, wrote down in their chronicles that *tai* means "good." But these were men fresh from the bonfires of the Inquisition, ready to impose their own ideas of good and evil on everyone they met, at sword point if necessary. From what I know of my ancestral culture, and by the poetic license of my own heart, I have come to believe that *tai* means that state of knowing ourselves to be connected, in reciprocity and gratitude, through the deepest ties of kinship, to everything that exists.

Tai guay nanichino: we are one with everything under the sun, dear hearts.

Ever since I learned that this year's High Holy Days theme was spiritual audacity, I've been thinking about the source of audacity and how we find it. I believe the answer is tai, the joy that comes from being fully present, here and now, with what is.

To be clear, when I say "joy," I don't mean happiness or optimism or contentment. You can turn your back on the world and find all those things. When I say that joy is the source of my audacity, I am speaking in the midst of heart-wrenching grief and anger for my country, in the midst of my own struggles with depression and loneliness, anxiety and overwhelm.

Joy is to mood as stars are to the weather, a constant to steer by, sometimes hidden by storm clouds but high above them, untouched by wind or rain. This is not to say that the weather of the world isn't violent, drenching, harsh. We could spin forever from emergency to emergency, shouting no to each new crime—but that would be steering by chasing clouds. If we are to live audaciously, we need to step into the calm eye of the storm and steer by the stars, to imagine in rich detail the biggest, most delicious, satisfying, inclusive future that we can, a great flowering

of human potential and well-being, project our hearts and minds into that future, and then spend our lives walking toward it, and each time the weather buffets us, wait for a glimpse of sky, find that bright point of light, and adjust our course.

But in order for that dream to be accurate, to burn bright enough for navigation, it needs to be rooted in the reality of here and now, all of it. This is how we turn trauma into light. Trauma is not the opposite of joy; it's the husk around its seed. The more we face into the world, the more we let ourselves know how other people live, the more we learn about not only their pain and rage but also their love and resilience, their defiance and hope, and it's from that full spectrum of knowing that we fill in the details and colors of the world we want. There is a joy that rises from being with what's true, even when that truth includes the terrible.

We live in a society that tries to reduce our biggest dreams to marketable packets of distraction or comfort, as if that were the most we could hope for, but comfort and distraction are not the wellsprings of joy. We live in a society that tries to control us through bribery and threat, hoping we'll decide to live small lives that won't upset the way things are. We are not grasshoppers. Grasshoppers are fine. They are here to live grasshopper lives. But we are people, with the gifts of both memory and imagination, able to learn from our many histories and create what does not yet exist. It makes it possible to face the terrible with joy.

We don't need to spend every moment of the day shouting no. We can learn to sing a thousand-voice harmony of yes. In 1993 I visited the National School of Music in Havana, and while our delegation waited for the bus to pick us up, a group of teenage boys, two of them Black, three of them white, played guitar for us. It took a few minutes to realize what it was that moved me to the edge of sobbing. Then it hit me. It was the first time I had ever seen young Black men whose body language held no trace of the fear of violence. Whenever I go out into the streets to express my rage and grief over yet another Black or brown death at the hands of the police, I carry those boys with me. They are my yes. Yes is what keeps me going.

And I carry MPD150, a hope-based, grassroots organizing project in Minneapolis, in which the communities most affected by policing researched and evaluated the performance of the Minneapolis Police Department over the past 150 years, concluded that they are best served by a future that is police-free, and are charting a path to make it so.

It's true that audacity can arise from crisis, and courage can spring from fear. Emergencies can draw more from us than we ever thought possible, but that kind of boldness runs on adrenaline. It doesn't have the horsepower for the long haul. When the crisis passes, we settle back, exhausted, into our accustomed lives.

To live a lifetime of audacity, dwelling in the place where joy meets justice, year after year, can only be sustained by being so in love with a vision of what's possible that we no longer flirt with despair.

The world is full of weather, full of all the urgency and danger of the present moment, but the work of social justice has always been urgent, and if we let that drive us, we'll never make the time and space to dream together, dream big, and set a real course toward our dreaming.

Imagine this: that each one of us is weighed down by unearned punishments and unearned rewards, that when we are punished not for what we do but just for existing, it's like being wounded, so that we guard our injuries, and they become easily inflamed, making us lash out or turn in, and when we are rewarded not for what we do but just for existing, it's like being drugged, so that it seems natural to have more and better and easier, and we are oblivious to whole provinces of the social terrain where our own privileges settle like fog, to hide the landmarks of other people's suffering.

Imagine, then, that seeking the sources of audacity in our lives, choosing to know whatever we must to find it, we discover that there is nothing to defend. Whatever the harm done to us and the real wounds of it, our scars are not treasures to be hoarded. Whatever our complicity in the deprivation of others, whatever we've allowed ourselves, in the name of comfort or fear, to accept instead of freedom, is not worth having, that injustice was already here when we were born, that it's much bigger and older than our mistakes, that claiming each other is much better than lying low.

Then the work of turning to face truth, of bringing our full selves into the commons, becomes joyful beyond measure. When the fog is burned off, what remains is an illuminated landscape, where the entire geology of our lives is laid bare and we see how we are woven together, see the ground of solidarity we must walk, to reach the future we love.

Tai guay nanichino: we are one with each other, lit by hope, ablaze with love.

When forty-nine mostly queer people were murdered at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando last year, part of what broke my heart was that half

of them were young Puerto Ricans, economic exiles from my homeland, ravaged by colonialism. They were family. It was a blow that hit so close to home that I reeled. I had to look hard to find my stars. I found them by writing this poem:

From V'ahavta:
Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,
recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of empire:
Another world is possible.
Imagine winning. This is your sacred task.
This is your power. Imagine
every detail of winning, the exact smell of the summer streets
in which no one has been shot, the muscles you have never
unclenched from worry, gone soft as newborn skin,
the sparkling taste of food when we know
that no one on earth is hungry, that the beggars are fed,
that the old man under the bridge and the woman
wrapping herself in thin sheets in the back seat of a car,
and the children who suck on stones,
nest under a flock of roofs that keep multiplying their shelter.
Lean with all your being towards that day
when the poor of the world shake down a rain of good fortune
out of the heavy clouds, and justice rolls down like waters.
Defend the world in which we win as if it were your child.
It is your child.
Defend it as if it were your lover.
It is your lover.
When you inhale and when you exhale
breathe the possibility of another world
into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body
until it shines with hope.
Then imagine more.
Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth

into the throat with which you sing. Escalate your dreams.
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd
over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.
Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.
So that we, and the children of our children's children
may live.

Today, with Puerto Rico torn apart by climate violence disguised as natural disaster, burdened by manufactured debt, when it is we who have been robbed and are owed, I am imagining all that is possible when people stand among the ruins of a colonial misery they can't bear the thought of rebuilding, and ask, What could we do instead?

When the people of Minneapolis stop talking about bad apples and police reforms and ask, What could we do instead?

Ninety-eight years ago today, more than a hundred Black sharecroppers in Elaine, Arkansas, had the audacity to organize themselves to demand better pay from plantation owners. White mobs responded with a state-sanctioned rampage, massacring between 100 and 240 Black people. Returning Black veterans of World War I, no longer willing to tolerate the violation of their most basic rights, also began demanding justice, and faced the same murderous mobs. A wave of lynchings and race riots swept through dozens of cities in what came to be known as the Red Summer of 1919. None of the attackers went to jail.

Right now, as we pray for the spiritual audacity we need in these times in order to do the work of *tikkun*, tens of thousands are honoring those dead tenant farmers and drawing from their courage, as they pray with their feet in Washington, DC, and in sister marches around the country, saying no to the killing and systematic abuse of Black and indigenous people, saying yes to a world in which their full humanity is celebrated and safe. Here and there, two breaths of a single prayer.

So right now, rise in spirit and intention, and if you can, and choose to, with your body, and let's turn our faces toward the truth of their vision and add our yes to theirs: Say after me *tai guay nanichino*. Or in the words of the Argentinian singer Fito Páez: "Who says that everything is lost. I come to offer you my heart."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Medicine Stories*. I am proud of the fact that the first edition (South End Press, 1998) has become a classic and is the kind of book that people lend to their friends, give as gifts, and pass from hand to hand.

But as a disabled, chronically ill elder, without the safety net of an academic job, I need the community of my readers to financially support my work. If you pass my book on to someone else, buy a copy to send to a prisoner or a domestic abuse shelter or clinic waiting room or your rabbi. I don't want to stop the easy flow of my writing through networks of people who will make good use of it, but I do want to be paid for writing it.

For nearly forty years I've been writing poems and essays that are widely used in our social justice movements, and almost all of that work has been unpaid. I have built up a good amount of social capital—my ideas and words are valued and respected, and people write to me to tell me how much the books and articles and poetry have meant to them—but this hasn't translated into the income I need in order to pay my bills and have a healthy, productive old age.

I am experimenting with a new economic model, in which the broad community of people who read, teach, and quote my work pays me for the *practice* of continuing to bring my particular perspective to the challenges

of our times, pays me to write and speak and broadcast what I have to offer, rather than waiting to buy my products. This frees me to say the things I think need saying, without having to package them into a book I can sell. It frees me to use my limited energy to tell the stories that need telling, instead of chasing grants and spending my time marketing. It frees me to accept only the speaking engagements that excite me, protecting my time and my health. It lets me give away books to those who can't afford them, without losing my livelihood.

Patreon is a funding platform created by and for artists. You join by pledging a small monthly amount. This brings you into an inner circle of people who actively back me to do what I do. It also means that you receive regular posts from me, in which I let you know what I'm working on, comment on what's happening in the world, and share excerpts of unpublished writing, and you can ask me questions, comment on my posts, and engage other supporters in conversation.

So please share my work. Buy copies for your friends and relations. Assign the whole book to your classes instead of a single excerpt for which I will never receive royalties. Support Duke University Press to continue publishing radical social thought. But I also urge you to join my Patreon community and help me to write the next book, and the one after that. Go to https://www.patreon.com/auroralevinsmorales.

I hope to see you there.

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